

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, rendered in a dark brown color, framing the central text.

# **GUZ 21**

## **Ecclesiastes**

*Bible Commentary:  
David Guzik TEV - XXI*

**David Guzik**

**David Guzik's Commentary On**  
**21 Ecclesiastes**  
**Biblical Text – TEV (Good News Bible)**

**All Is Vanity**

**Ecc 1:1** These are the words of the Philosopher, David's son, who was king in Jerusalem.

Ecc 1:2 It is useless, useless, said the Philosopher. Life is useless, all useless.

Ecc 1:3 You spend your life working, laboring, and what do you have to show for it?

Ecc 1:4 Generations come and generations go, but the world stays just the same.

Ecc 1:5 The sun still rises, and it still goes down, going wearily back to where it must start all over again.

Ecc 1:6 The wind blows south, the wind blows north—round and round and back again.

Ecc 1:7 Every river flows into the sea, but the sea is not yet full. The water returns to where the rivers began, and starts all over again.

Ecc 1:8 Everything leads to weariness—a weariness too great for words. Our eyes can never see enough to be satisfied; our ears can never hear enough.

Ecc 1:9 What has happened before will happen again. What has been done before will be done again. There is nothing new in the whole world.

Ecc 1:10 "Look," they say, "here is something new!" But no, it has all happened before, long before we were born.

Ecc 1:11 No one remembers what has happened in the past, and no one in days to come will remember what happens between now and then.

## **The Vanity of Wisdom**

Ecc 1:12 I, the Philosopher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.

Ecc 1:13 I determined that I would examine and study all the things that are done in this world. God has laid a miserable fate upon us.

Ecc 1:14 I have seen everything done in this world, and I tell you, it is all useless. It is like chasing the wind.

Ecc 1:15 You can't straighten out what is crooked; you can't count things that aren't there.

Ecc 1:16 I told myself, "I have become a great man, far wiser than anyone who ruled Jerusalem before me. I know what wisdom and knowledge really are."

Ecc 1:17 I was determined to learn the difference between knowledge and foolishness, wisdom and madness. But I found out that I might as well be chasing the wind.

Ecc 1:18 The wiser you are, the more worries you have; the more you know, the more it hurts.

## **Ecclesiastes 1:1-18**

### **Ecclesiastes 1 - The Vanity of Life**

#### **A. Introduction: The Preacher, the author of Ecclesiastes.**

##### *1. (1a) The Preacher.*

#### **The words of the Preacher,**

a. **The words of the Preacher:** The Book of Ecclesiastes is one of the most unusual and perhaps most difficult to understand books of the Bible. It has a spirit of hopeless despair; it has no praise or peace; it seems to promote questionable conduct. Yet these **words of the Preacher** show us the futility and foolishness of a life lived without an eternal perspective.

i. The question in Ecclesiastes isn't about the existence of God; the author is no atheist, and God is always there. The question is whether or not God *matters*. The answer to that question is vitally connected to a responsibility to God that goes beyond this earthly life.

ii. "He does believe in 'God,' but, very significantly, he never uses the sacred name 'Lord.' He has shaken himself free, or wishes to represent a character who has shaken himself free from Revelation, and is fighting the problem of life, its meaning and worth, without any help from Law, or Prophet, or Psalm." (Maclaren)

iii. In the search for this answer, **the Preacher** searched the depths of human experience, including despair. He thoroughly examined the emptiness and futility of life lived *without* eternity before coming to the conclusion of the necessity of eternity.

iv. "We face the appalling inference that nothing has meaning, nothing matters under the sun. It is then that we can hear, as the good news which it is, that *everything* matters – 'for God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.'" (Kidner)

v. "What, then, is the purpose of Ecclesiastes? It is an essay in apologetics. It defends the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative." (Eaton)

vi. "He does not come as a formal philosopher; it is a word from God he has to share, despite his reflective low-key approach. He does not present half-a-dozen arguments for the existence of God. Instead he picks up our own questions. Can you cope with life without having any idea where you are going? You don't have

all the answers to life's enigmas, do you? Your neo-pagan view of life doesn't give you any hope of achieving very much, does it? Nature will not answer your questions, and you are bored by it anyway. History baffles your attempts to understand it. You don't like to think about your own death; yet it is the most certain fact about your existence." (Eaton)

vii. "Ecclesiastes does not pretend to preach the Gospel. Rather, it encourages the reader to a God-centered worldview rather than falling victim to frustrations and unanswered questions. None of its contents has to be rejected in the light of the New Testament." (Wright)

b. **The Preacher:** In Hebrew, this translates the word *Kohleth* (or, *Kobellet*). The idea is of someone who might gather, lead, or speak to a group of people – a congregation.

i. "The word is connected with the Hebrew for assembling, and its form suggests some kind of office-bearer.... The many attempts at translating this title include: 'Ecclesiastes', 'The Preacher', 'The Speaker', 'The President', 'The Spokesman', 'The Philosopher'. We might almost add, 'The Professor'!" (Kidner)

ii. These are definitely the **words of the Preacher**, but in this apologetically oriented sermon his focus on God is indirect. "It makes no mention of Yahweh, the LORD, the name of the God of Israel's covenant faith. It scarcely refers to the law of God, the only possible reference being in 12:13. It scarcely refers to the nation of Israel (only in 1:12). Why these omissions? The answer seems to be that the Preacher's argument stands on its own feet and does not depend on Israel's covenant faith to be valid. He is appealing to universally observable facts." (Eaton)

## 2. (1b) *The identity of the Preacher.*

### **The son of David, king in Jerusalem.**

a. **The son of David:** This identifies the Preacher as David's son, Solomon. Some believe that another wrote it in Solomon's name, but there is no compelling reason to say that anyone other than Solomon wrote it.

i. "In view of the traditions concerning Solomon (1 Kings 2-12; 2 Chronicles 1-9), without any further definition the title would certainly lead any reader to suppose that the allusion is to him. Also the account in 2:1-11 is strongly reminiscent of Solomon; almost every phrase has its parallel in the narratives concerning Solomon." (Eaton)

ii. "There will come another enigmatic note in verse 16, with its claim to a wisdom 'surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me'. This rules out any successor to the matchless Solomon." (Kidner)

b. **King in Jerusalem:** From his royal standing, Solomon had the wisdom, freedom, resources, and standing to write this work.

i. In a sense, *only* Solomon could write this book. He had both the wisdom and the resources to work through these problems. "With Qoheleth we put on the mantle of a Solomon, that most brilliant and least limited of men, to set out on the search. With every gift and power at our command, it would be strange if we should come back empty-handed." (Kidner)

ii. When Solomon wrote this, he did so in a style understood and appreciated in his day. "The particular brand of wisdom that characterizes Ecclesiastes is well attested in the ancient world. We may call it 'pessimism literature'. Ecclesiastes is the only biblical example of this old literary tradition." (Eaton)

iii. "In an Egyptian work, *The Man Who Was Tired of Life*, written between 2300 and 2100 BC, a man disputed with his soul whether life was worth living or whether suicide was the only logical act. 'Life is a transitory state,' he complained to himself; 'you are alive but what profit do you get? Yet you yearn for life like a man of wealth.' Death is 'a bringer of weeping'; never again afterwards will a man 'see the sun'. Little can be done. 'Follow the happy day and forget care.'" (Eaton)

iv. The Puritan commentator John Trapp wrote what some other also believe, that Ecclesiastes was Solomon's statement of error and penance, and evidence that he turned back to God at the end of his life – despite the absence of such assurance in 1 Kings 11. "He penned this penitential sermon, grown an old man, he had experimented all this that he here affirmeth, so that he might better begin his speech to his scholars." (Trapp)

## **B. The problem presented: the meaninglessness of life.**

1. (2) *The Preacher's summary: Life is vanity, without meaning.*

**"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher;**  
**"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."**

a. **Vanity of vanities:** The Preacher begins his sermon with his first conclusion (though not his ultimate conclusion). Looking at life all around, he judges it to be **vanity** – nothing, useless, meaningless.

i. "A wisp of vapour, a puff of wind, a mere breath – nothing you could get your hands on; the nearest thing to zero. That is the 'vanity' this book is about." (Kidner)

ii. “*Vanity* (*hebel*) includes (i) brevity and unsubstantiality, *emptiness*... (ii) unreliability, frailty... (iii) futility, as in Job 9:29 (Hebrew), where ‘in vanity’ means ‘to no effect’; (iv) deceit (*cf.* Jer 16:19; Zec 10:2).” (Eaton)

b. **Vanity of vanities**: To strengthen his point, the Preacher judged life to be *the ultimate* vanity, the **vanity of vanities**. This Hebrew phrasing is used to express intensity or the ultimate of something, as in the phrase *holy of holies*.

i. This phrase (or something quite like it) will be used about 30 times in this short book. It is one of the major themes of Ecclesiastes.

c. **All is vanity**: To further strengthen the point, Solomon noted not only that life is **vanity**, but that **all is vanity**. It seemed that every part of life suffered from this emptiness.

i. We see from the first two verses that Solomon wrote this from a certain perspective, a perspective that through the book he will expose as inadequate and wrong. Most all of Ecclesiastes is written from this perspective, through the eyes of a man who thinks and lives as if God doesn’t matter.

ii. “It is an absolutely accurate statement of life when it is lived under certain conditions; but it is not true as a statement of what life must necessarily be.” (Morgan) If you say, “My life isn’t vanity; it isn’t meaningless. My life is filled with meaning and purpose.” That’s wonderful; but you can’t ignore the premise of the Preacher – the premise of life *under the sun*.

iii. Therefore Ecclesiastes is filled with what we might call true lies. Given the perspective “God does not



matter,” it is true that **all is vanity**. Since that perspective is wrong, it *is not true* that **all is vanity**. Yet Solomon makes us think through this wrong perspective thoroughly through Ecclesiastes.

iv. Solomon thinks through this perspective, but he wasn’t the first nor the last to see life this way. Many moderns judge life to be equally futile.

- “We all live in a house on fire, no fire department to call; no way out, just the upstairs window to look out of while the fire burns the house down with us trapped, locked in it.” (Playwright Tennessee Williams)

- “Most people get a fair amount of fun out of their lives, but on balance life is suffering and only the very young or the very foolish imagine otherwise.” (Author George Orwell)

- “Life is rather like a can of sardines, we’re all of us looking for the key.” (Playwright Alan Bennett)

## 2. (3) *Life and work* ***under the sun***.

### **What profit has a man from all his labor In which he toils under the sun?**

a. **What profit has a man from all his labor:** Using the language from the world of business, the Preacher asked a worthy question. He knew that life was filled with **labor** – but what is it worth? What does it **profit**?

i. **Profit:** “A commercial term; life ‘pays no dividends’.” (Eaton)

ii. Jesus expressed a similar thought in Mar 8:36 : *For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?*

iii. “All things are sweeter in the ambition than in the fruition. There is a singular vanity in this splendid misery.” (Trapp)

b. **In which he toils under the sun:** This is the first stating of an essential theme through Ecclesiastes. This phrase will be repeated more than 25 times through the book. The idea isn't "on a sunny day" or something having to do with the weather. The idea is "in this world that we can see; the material world." It is life considered *without* an eternal perspective.

i. "If our view of life goes no further than 'under the sun', all our endeavours will have an undertone of misery." (Eaton)

ii. The use of the phrase **under the sun** "shows that the writer's interest was universal and not limited to only his own people and land." (Wright)

### 3. (4-7) *The unending cycle of creation.*

**One generation passes away, and another generation comes;**

**But the earth abides forever.**

**The sun also rises, and the sun goes down,**

**And hastens to the place where it arose.**

**The wind goes toward the south,**

**And turns around to the north;**

**The wind whirls about continually,**

**And comes again on its circuit.**

**All the rivers run into the sea,**

**Yet the sea *is* not full;**

**To the place from which the rivers come,**

**There they return again.**

a. **One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever:**

Using several examples, the Preacher observes that nothing seems to change very much in the seemingly unending cycle of nature.

i. "He looks out upon humanity, and sees that in one aspect the world is full of births, and in another full of deaths. Coffins and cradles seem the main furniture, and he hears the tramp, tramp, tramp of the generations passing over a soil honeycombed with tombs." (Maclaren)

b. **The sun also rises... The wind goes toward the south... the rivers run into the sea:** From what Solomon could observe *under the sun*, these unchanging cycles expressed the unchanging monotony of life, leading to its vanity and meaninglessness.

i. "For Old Testament orthodoxy, creation rings with the praises of the LORD. Creation is his.... But, says the Preacher, take away its God, and creation no longer reflects his glory; it illustrates the weariness of mankind." (Eaton)

ii. "All the rivers of earthly joy may be flowing into your heart, but they will never fill it. They may recede, or dry up, or ebb; but if not, still they will never satisfy.... But in Christ there is perennial interest.... We need not go outside of Him for new delights; and to know Him is to possess a secret which makes all things new." (Meyer)

4. (8-11) *The unending cycle of man's labor.*

**All things *are* full of labor;**

**Man cannot express *it*.**

**The eye is not satisfied with seeing,**

**Nor the ear filled with hearing.**

**That which has been *is* what will be,**

**That which *is* done is what will be done,**

**And *there is* nothing new under the sun.**

**Is there anything of which it may be said,**

**"See, this *is* new"?**

**It has already been in ancient times before us.**

***There is no remembrance of former things,  
Nor will there be any remembrance of things that are  
to come  
By those who will come after.***

a. **All things are full of labor; man cannot express it:** Solomon then observed that the meaninglessness of life wasn't only reflected in nature. This frustration is also evident in human effort and endeavor. Despite all man's working (**labor**), **seeing**, and **hearing**, he is still **not satisfied**.

i. "It is impossible to calculate how much anxiety, pain, labour, and fatigue are necessary in order to carry on the *common operations of life*. But an *endless desire of gain*, and an *endless curiosity to witness* a variety of results, cause men to, labour on." (Clarke)

ii. "What is the difference between a squirrel in a cage who only makes his prison go round the faster by his swift race, and the man who lives toilsome days for transitory objects which he may never attain?" (Maclaren)

b. **That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun:** Despite all man's work and progress, life seems monotonously the same. Things that seem new get old very quickly, so it could be said "**there is nothing new under the sun**."

i. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss. "In their new guise the old ways go on. As a race, we never learn." (Kidner)

ii. There may be **nothing new under the sun**; but thankfully the followers of Jesus – those born again

by God's Spirit – don't live **under the sun** in that sense. Their life is filled with new things.

- A new name (Isa 62:2, Rev 2:17).
- A new community (Eph 2:14).
- A new help from angels (Psa 91:11).
- A new commandment (Joh 13:34).
- A new covenant (Jer 31:33, Mat 26:28).
- A new and living way to heaven (Heb 10:20).
- A new purity (1Co 5:7).
- A new nature (Eph 4:24).
- A new creation in Jesus Christ (2Co 5:17).
- All things become new! (2Co 5:17, Rev 21:5).

c. **There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of things that are come:** The futility of life seems to extend in both directions, both into the past and into the future. Man works hard, yet it never seems to make a lasting difference and all is simply forgotten.

i. "How many memorable matters were never recorded! How many ancient records long since perished!" (Trapp)

### **C. The failure of wisdom to satisfy.**

*1. (12-15) Searching by wisdom.*

**I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all *is* vanity and grasping for the wind.**

***What is crooked cannot be made straight,  
And what is lacking cannot be numbered.***

a. **I, the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem:** Solomon was internationally famous for his great wisdom. If the answers to the seeming emptiness of life could be found by wisdom, Solomon was the one to find them.

i. Solomon's great wisdom was a gift of God. When God offered him whatever he pleased, he asked for wisdom, especially the wisdom to lead the people of God (1Ki 3:5-28). Therefore, God made Solomon so wise that he wrote thousands of proverbs, and he was considered to be wiser than all the men of his day (1Ki 4:29-34).

b. **I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven:** With the unique ability to make such a search, Solomon looked for the answers in **wisdom** – by which he meant human wisdom that *excluded* answers in the light of eternity.

i. **I set my heart to seek and search out:** "The two words are not synonymous. The former verb implies penetrating into the depth of an object before one; the other word taking a comprehensive survey of matters further away; so that two methods and scopes of investigation are signified." (Deane)

ii. This is the wisdom of those who guide us to a better life in the here-and-now; how to live a healthier, happier, more prosperous life. This wisdom certainly has value, and many lives would be better for following it. Yet if it excludes a true appreciation of eternity and our responsibilities in the world to come, this wisdom has no true answer to the meaninglessness of life. It only shows us how to live our meaningless lives *better*.

iii. In other places in Ecclesiastes, **wisdom** is thought of as a blessing – as it is; even wisdom that excludes eternity (Ecc 7:11-12; Ecc 7:19). Yet this kind of **under the sun** wisdom cannot shed light upon the problem of the vanity and meaninglessness of life.

c. **All that is done under heaven:** *God's* heaven and eternity are not in view here, only the day and night skies. This is another way of saying, "**under the sun.**" All man's work, accomplishment, and searching for wisdom seems to amount to nothing.

i. "*All that is done under heaven* shows that the total resources of a limited world-view are the object of study; the vertical aspect is not yet in view." (Eaton)

d. **This burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised:** The seeming futility of life *comes from God*; He **has given** it to man. God has deliberately built a system where life seems meaningless and empty without the understanding of a living, active God to whom we must give account.

i. It may seem cruel of God to devise such a system, but it is actually evidence of His great love and mercy. He built within us the desire and need for that which brings meaning and fulfillment to life. As Augustine wrote, the Creator made a God-shaped space in each of us, which can only be filled with Him.

ii. This desire is found not only in us as people, but also in creation itself. God also subjected creation to this futility until He one day brings the promised fulfillment. *For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope* (Rom 8:20).

iii. At the same time, this is a **burdensome task**. It isn't always easy to find these answers because our pride, self-reliance, and self-love work against finding them.

e. **What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered:** The Preacher's initial search for the answers in wisdom (under the sun) brought him only despair.

i. "With his usual devastating candour Qoheleth is quick to tell us the worst. The search has come to nothing." (Kidner)

ii. "The third conclusion explains why the 'under the sun' thinker is so frustrated. It is because there are twists (*what is crooked*) and gaps (*what is lacking*) in all thinking. No matter how the thinker ponders, he cannot straighten out life's anomalies, nor reduce all he sees to a neat system." (Eaton)

## 2. (16-18) *The failure of wisdom confirmed.*

**I communed with my heart, saying, "Look, I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge." And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind.**

**For in much wisdom *is* much grief,  
And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.**

a. **I communed with my heart:** This approach is natural for anyone who looks for the answers *under the sun*, apart from an eternal perspective. They look *inward* for wisdom and answers, instead of to the God who rules eternity.



b. **I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind:** The repeated and intensified search for wisdom brought no ultimate meaning. The solution wasn't to think harder and search better; it was all **grasping for the wind**.

c. **For in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow:** The more the Preacher understood life *under the sun*, the greater his despair. The more he learned, the more he realized what he *didn't* know. The more he knew, the more he knew life's sorrows.

i. "So long as wisdom is restricted to the realm 'under the sun', it sees the throbbing tumult of creation, life scurrying round its ever-repetitive circuits, and nothing more. 'The more you understand, the more you ache' (Moffatt)." (Eaton)

## **The Vanity of Self-Indulgence**

**Ecc 2:1** I decided to enjoy myself and find out what happiness is. But I found that this is useless, too.

Ecc 2:2 I discovered that laughter is foolish, that pleasure does you no good.

Ecc 2:3 Driven on by my desire for wisdom, I decided to cheer myself up with wine and have a good time. I thought that this might be the best way people can spend their short lives on earth.

Ecc 2:4 I accomplished great things. I built myself houses and planted vineyards.

Ecc 2:5 I planted gardens and orchards, with all kinds of fruit trees in them;

Ecc 2:6 I dug ponds to irrigate them.

Ecc 2:7 I bought many slaves, and there were slaves born in my household. I owned more livestock than anyone else

who had ever lived in Jerusalem.

Ecc 2:8 I also piled up silver and gold from the royal treasuries of the lands I ruled. Men and women sang to entertain me, and I had all the women a man could want.

Ecc 2:9 Yes, I was great, greater than anyone else who had ever lived in Jerusalem, and my wisdom never failed me.

Ecc 2:10 Anything I wanted, I got. I did not deny myself any pleasure. I was proud of everything I had worked for, and all this was my reward.

Ecc 2:11 Then I thought about all that I had done and how hard I had worked doing it, and I realized that it didn't mean a thing. It was like chasing the wind—of no use at all.

### **The Vanity of Living Wisely**

Ecc 2:12 After all, a king can only do what previous kings have done. So I started thinking about what it meant to be wise or reckless or foolish.

Ecc 2:13 Oh, I know, "Wisdom is better than foolishness, just as light is better than darkness.

Ecc 2:14 The wise can see where they are going, and fools cannot." But I also know that the same fate is waiting for us all.

Ecc 2:15 I thought to myself, "What happens to fools is going to happen to me, too. So what have I gained from being so wise?" "Nothing," I answered, "not a thing."

Ecc 2:16 No one remembers the wise, and no one remembers fools. In days to come, we will all be forgotten. We must all die—wise and foolish alike.

Ecc 2:17 So life came to mean nothing to me, because everything in it had brought me nothing but trouble. It had all been useless; I had been chasing the wind.

### **The Vanity of Toil**

Ecc 2:18 Nothing that I had worked for and earned meant a thing to me, because I knew that I would have to leave it

to my successor,

Ecc 2:19 and he might be wise, or he might be foolish—who knows? Yet he will own everything I have worked for, everything my wisdom has earned for me in this world. It is all useless.

Ecc 2:20 So I came to regret that I had worked so hard.

Ecc 2:21 You work for something with all your wisdom, knowledge, and skill, and then you have to leave it all to someone who hasn't had to work for it. It is useless, and it isn't right!

Ecc 2:22 You work and worry your way through life, and what do you have to show for it?

Ecc 2:23 As long as you live, everything you do brings nothing but worry and heartache. Even at night your mind can't rest. It is all useless.

Ecc 2:24 The best thing we can do is eat and drink and enjoy what we have earned. And yet, I realized that even this comes from God.

Ecc 2:25 How else could you have anything to eat or enjoy yourself at all?

Ecc 2:26 God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness to those who please him, but he makes sinners work, earning and saving, so that what they get can be given to those who please him. It is all useless. It is like chasing the wind.

## **Ecclesiastes 2:1-26**

### **Ecclesiastes 2 - Life In View Of Death**

#### **A. The pursuit of pleasure tested – and found lacking.**

##### *1. (1) The summary.*

**I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure”; but surely, this also was vanity.**

a. **I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you"**: The previous section saw Solomon look for the meaning of life in wisdom – wisdom as it can be understood *apart* from eternity. He found no meaning in skillful, wise living *under the sun*. Now he continued his search for meaning and tested a life of pleasure and amusement.

i. "The Preacher is not testing pleasure so much as himself." (Eaton)

b. **Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure**: Solomon tested life's meaning in **mirth** and **pleasure**. He tested the theory many live under today; that the meaning of life is found in more and varied pleasures, entertainments, and excitements.

c. **But surely, this also was vanity**: The Preacher will shortly explain how he came to this conclusion; but he tells us the result of the testing at the beginning.

## 2. (2-3) *The search for meaning in pleasure.*

**I said of laughter – "Madness!"; and of mirth, "What does it accomplish?" I searched in my heart *how* to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what *was* good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives.**

a. **I said of laughter – "Madness!"; and of mirth, "What does it accomplish"**: Solomon tested the life lived for laughter, pleasure, and fun. Like a modern celebrity he ran from party to party, entertainment to entertainment. At the end of it all, he judged it to be **"Madness"** and without accomplishment.

i. **Laughter**: "A superficial gaiety, used of the 'fun' of a game (Pro 1:23) or a party (Ecc 10:19), or the 'derision' which Jeremiah suffered (Jer 20:7)."  
(Eaton)

ii. **Mirth**: “Thoughtful pleasure, the joy of religious festivals (Num 10:10, Jdg 16:23), gratitude in serving the LORD (Deu 28:47), or the proclamation of a king (1Ki 1:40).” (Eaton)

iii. Yet, Eaton is careful to add that “the distinction cannot always be sharply drawn.”

iv. Clarke on **laughter** and **mirth**: “He tells the *former* to her face that *she is mad*; but as to the *latter*, he thinks her so much beneath his notice, that he only points at her, and instantly turns his back.”

b. **I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine... and how to lay hold on folly**: The Preacher lived a life satiated with the pleasures of wine and light, frivolous amusements. He wanted to **see what was good for the sons of men to do** if this life was all there was.

3. (4-8) *The search for meaning in work and accomplishments.*

**I made my works great, I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all *kinds* of fruit trees in them. I made myself water pools from which to water the growing trees of the grove. I acquired male and female servants, and had servants born in my house. Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces. I acquired male and female singers, the delights of the sons of men, *and* musical instruments of all kinds.**

a. **I made my works great**: The Preacher looked not only for meaning in amusements, but also in great and legitimate accomplishments. He tried to give life meaning

through the satisfaction that comes through building and organizing and improving one's environment.

i. "As if he had over-reacted in turning to futile pleasures, he now gives himself to the joys of creativity." (Kidner)

b. **Gardens and orchards... male and female servants... herds and flocks... silver and gold:** If building, improving, and amassing great riches and accomplishments could give true meaning to life, the Preacher would have found it.

i. **Special treasures of kings and of the provinces:** "1. The *taxes* levied off his subjects. 2. The *tribute* given by the neighboring potentates. Both these make the 'peculiar treasure of kings;' *taxes* and *tribute*." (Clarke)

ii. **Musical instruments of all kinds:** "The final item in the list may well refer to Solomon's wives and concubines, but the Hebrew word does not occur elsewhere in the Bible." (Wright) The NIV translates, "Harem" and the RSV "Concubines." The word might be related to the Hebrew word for *breast*. According to Wright, a Canaanite word of similar form is used to translate the Egyptian word for "concubine." However, the traditional Jewish rendering is **musical instruments**.

4. (9-11) *The analysis from the search.*

**So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.**

**Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them.  
I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure,  
For my heart rejoiced in all my labor;  
And this was my reward from all my labor.**

**Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done**

**And on the labor in which I had toiled;**

**And indeed all *was* vanity and grasping for the wind.**

***There was* no profit under the sun.**

a. **So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem:** Solomon's accomplishments rightly lifted him to prominence, and he had whatever meaning *fame* could bring to life.

b. **Also my wisdom remained with me:** In all of this Solomon did not lose his wisdom or ability to genuinely assess meaning and fulfillment – at least in an *under the sun* sense.

c. **Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure:** This is even more significant coming from Solomon, who had the resources to grant whatever his eyes desired, and every pleasure of his heart.

i. "How many are there that have died of the wound in the eye!" (Trapp)

d. **For my heart rejoiced in all my labor:** We might say that the Preacher lived this period as a hedonist, but as an intelligent one. He looked for *legitimate* pleasures in life, such as the rightful pleasure one takes in the accomplishments of hard work (**my reward from all my labor**).

e. **Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done... indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind:** Solomon examined his life lived for pleasure – even legitimate pleasures – and saw that it too was meaningless. **All was vanity.** There was no enduring, *eternal* sense of meaning to life lived for these earthly pleasures and accomplishments.

i. "This is as modern as ennui [a feeling of dissatisfaction and uselessness] of every human soul which seeks knowledge, mirth, wealth, life – and forgets God." (Morgan)

**B. The certainty and cruelty of death.**

1. (12-17) *Death makes equal the wise and the fool.*

**Then I turned myself to consider wisdom and madness and folly;**

**For what *can* the man *do* who succeeds the king? –  
*Only* what he has already done.**

**Then I saw that wisdom excels folly  
As light excels darkness.**

**The wise man's eyes *are* in his head,  
But the fool walks in darkness.**

**Yet I myself perceived  
That the same event happens to them all.**

**So I said in my heart,  
"As it happens to the fool,  
It also happens to me,  
And why was I then more wise?"**

**Then I said in my heart,  
"This also *is* vanity."**

**For *there is* no more remembrance of the wise than of  
the fool forever,**

**Since all that now *is* will be forgotten in the days to  
come.**

**And how does a wise *man* die?  
As the fool!**

**Therefore I hated life because the work that was done  
under the sun *was* distressing to me, for all *is* vanity  
and grasping for the wind.**

a. **I turned myself to consider wisdom and  
madness and folly:** The Preacher continued to search



after meaning and life, and followed the lines of **wisdom and madness and folly** further, unto their ending point.

b. **For what can the man do who succeeds the king:** Solomon here spoke of *himself* as the son of David (Ecc 1:1); yet he also spoke of his own successor (who turned out to be Rehoboam, 1Ki 11:43). Of both, Solomon understood that the new king can do **only what he has already done**. Even for a king, there is nothing new under the sun (Ecc 1:9).

c. **Wisdom excels folly... Yet I myself perceived that the same event happens to them all:** The Preacher saw the meaninglessness of even wise living, pleasure, and accomplishment in a life lived *under the sun* – apart from the knowledge that eternity is real and God *matters*.

i. No matter how wise one is or is not; how much they do or do not accomplish; or how much pleasure one has or does not have, **the same event happens to them all: they all die**. Given the Preacher's premise – that eternity and God do not matter – this is the only possible conclusion.

ii. "Everything may tell us that wisdom is *not* on a par with folly, not goodness with evil; but no matter: if death is the end of the road, the contention that there is nothing to choose between them will get the last word." (Kidner)

d. **As it happens to the fool, it also happens to me, and why was I then more wise:** If death ends it all, then this life is robbed of true meaning. Even the good and great accomplishments of this world are unbelievably *temporary*, and therefore ultimately meaningless. The **wise man** dies just **as the fool**. Truly, the Preacher looked at this and said, **"This also is vanity."**

e. **Therefore I hated life... for all is vanity and grasping for the wind:** Given his premise of life *under the sun*, Solomon **hated life** because it was so meaningless (**vanity and grasping for the wind**).

i. Adam Clarke says that **life** is more literally *lives*. "*The lives*, both of the *wise*, the *madman*, and the *fool*. Also all the *stages* of life, the *child*, the *man*, and the *sage*. There was nothing in it worth *pursuing*, no *period* worth *re-living* and no *hope* that if this were possible I could again be more successful."

ii. **Therefore I hated life:** "If there is a lie at the centre of existence, and nonsense at the end of it, who has the heart to make anything of it?" (Kidner)

iii. "He has no illusions, though by rights it is we who should have none – we who have heard from the secularists themselves that our very planet is dying." (Kidner)

2. (18-23) *Death defeats all accomplishments.*

**Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labor in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity. Therefore I turned my heart and despaired of all the labor in which I had toiled under the sun. For there is a man whose labor is with wisdom, knowledge, and skill; yet he must leave his heritage to a man who has not labored for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun? For all his days are sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity.**

a. **Then I hated all my labor... because I must leave it to a man who will come after me:** Not only did Solomon hate life under this thinking (Ecc 2:17), he also hated his very accomplishments, saying of them, **"This also is vanity."**

i. The idea that Solomon might leave all his work and material wealth to **a fool** seemed to trouble him. This concern was well founded, because after Solomon's death, Rehoboam turned out to be **a fool** in many ways (1 Kings 12, 1Ki 14:21-31).

ii. "Alas! Solomon, the *wisest* of all men, made the *worst use* of his wisdom, had *seven hundred wives* and *three hundred concubines*, and yet left but *one son* behind him, to possess his *estates* and his *throne*, and that one was the silliest of fools!" (Clarke)

b. **There is a man whose labor is with wisdom, knowledge, and skill; yet he must leave his heritage to a man who has not labored for it:** Under his premise, death haunted Solomon. Not in the sense that he seemed afraid to die, but he despaired of how death (if that ends existence) makes all meaningless.

i. **I turned my heart and despaired of all the labor in which I had toiled under the sun:** "The only conclusion is that it is all useless. An abyss of despair results. He 'allowed [his] heart to despair' (as the Hebrew verb may be translated). This is one of the most moving points of the Old Testament, the antithesis of the New Testament's 'not in vain in the Lord' (1Co 15:58)."

 (Eaton)

c. **All his days are sorrowful, and his work burdensome; even in the night his heart takes no rest:** If death robs our work of meaning, then life is indeed **sorrowful**, work is **burdensome**, and there is

no **rest** or relief from the despair of a meaningless life. Surely, this **also is vanity**.

i. Actually, it's worse than **vanity**. The Preacher also observed that in an **under the sun** world, this is a **great evil**.

ii. The Preacher hints at a vital question: *why does this bother us so?* If this is indeed man's lot and always has been; if every thought of an eternal meaning to life is a wish and a fantasy, *then why does that idea cause discontent in most everyone?* Man may *wish* he could fly like a bird, but there is little sense of meaninglessness in the heart of a man or woman because they cannot fly like a bird. This is because man was *not* designed to fly like a bird; but he *is* designed for eternity.

iii. "Incidentally, this bitter reaction is a witness to our ability to stand clear of our condition and to weigh it up. To be outraged at what is universal and unavoidable suggests something of a divine discontentment, and hint of what the great saying in 3:11 will call 'eternity' in man's mind." (Kidner)

### **C. How to live life "under the sun."**

1. (24-25) *Keeping a good attitude despite despair.*

**Nothing is better for a man *than* that he should eat and drink, and *that* his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I?**

a. **Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink:** This thought is prominent in Ecclesiastes, being repeated some five times. It seems that the Preacher advised us how to make the best of a bad situation. If life really is as despairing and meaningless as

he has shown it to be, then we should simply accept that true meaning is impossible to find, and simply find contentment in moderate and responsible pleasures.

i. This thinking is prominent in our day. Few people live for true, eternal meaning in their life; so they live with *under the sun* rules. They try to work hard, to enjoy life, to have fun, to be nice, to not get caught doing wrong, and they try not to hurt anybody.

ii. This thinking may work in making a bad situation better; but it gives no true *meaning* to life in light of eternity.

iii. "This may seem to savor of epicurism, as may also some following passages of this book. For which cause some of the old Jew doctors were once in a mind to hide this whole book out of the way, and not suffer the common sort to see it any more." (Trapp)

**b. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God:** We again see that the Preacher is no atheist; he certainly believes in God. But the God of the Preacher is not the God who matters and gives meaning to life as it is connected to eternity. The **God** of the Preacher simply teaches us to make the best of a bad situation.

i. "Everything is vanity. To live under the sun is to decide at last that the natural thing to do is to take what comes. Materialism necessarily becomes fatalism." (Morgan)

**c. For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I:** Given the Preacher's premise, his life should be the best in a meaningless world. He could enjoy this world of despair better than anyone else. Yet his life was almost infinitely poorer than the most humble life lived with true meaning.

2. (26) *Perhaps the seeming injustice of this world may work to one's favor.*

**For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who *is* good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to *him who is good before God*. This also *is* vanity and grasping for the wind.**

a. **God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good:** Solomon reflected on how sometimes it seems that what the **sinner** has gathered and collected is given **to him who is good before God**. This might seem unjust, but even *under the sun*, sometimes injustice seems to work in one's favor.

i. "The fact that in the end the sinner's hoard will go to the righteous is only a crowning irony to what was in any case *vanity and a striving after the wind*." (Kidner)

b. **This also is vanity and grasping for the wind:** The Preacher knew that his seeming redistribution from God's hand was not enough to give true meaning to life lived *under the sun*.

## **A Time for Everything**

**Ecc 3:1** Everything that happens in this world happens at the time God chooses.

Ecc 3:2 He sets the time for birth and the time for death, the time for planting and the time for pulling up,

Ecc 3:3 the time for killing and the time for healing, the time for tearing down and the time for building.

Ecc 3:4 He sets the time for sorrow and the time for joy, the time for mourning and the time for dancing,

Ecc 3:5 the time for making love and the time for not making love, the time for kissing and the time for not kissing.

Ecc 3:6 He sets the time for finding and the time for losing, the time for saving and the time for throwing away,

Ecc 3:7 the time for tearing and the time for mending, the time for silence and the time for talk.

Ecc 3:8 He sets the time for love and the time for hate, the time for war and the time for peace.

### **The God-Given Task**

Ecc 3:9 What do we gain from all our work?

Ecc 3:10 I know the heavy burdens that God has laid on us.

Ecc 3:11 He has set the right time for everything. He has given us a desire to know the future, but never gives us the satisfaction of fully understanding what he does.

Ecc 3:12 So I realized that all we can do is be happy and do the best we can while we are still alive.

Ecc 3:13 All of us should eat and drink and enjoy what we have worked for. It is God's gift.

Ecc 3:14 I know that everything God does will last forever. You can't add anything to it or take anything away from it. And one thing God does is to make us stand in awe of him.

Ecc 3:15 Whatever happens or can happen has already happened before. God makes the same thing happen again and again.

### **From Dust to Dust**

Ecc 3:16 In addition, I have also noticed that in this world you find wickedness where justice and right ought to be.

Ecc 3:17 I told myself, "God is going to judge the righteous and the evil alike, because every thing, every action, will happen at its own set time."

Ecc 3:18 I decided that God is testing us, to show us that we are no better than animals.

Ecc 3:19 After all, the same fate awaits human beings and animals alike. One dies just like the other. They are the same kind of creature. A human being is no better off than an animal, because life has no meaning for either.

Ecc 3:20 They are both going to the same place—the dust. They both came from it; they will both go back to it.

Ecc 3:21 How can anyone be sure that the human spirit goes upward while an animal's spirit goes down into the ground?

Ecc 3:22 So I realized then that the best thing we can do is enjoy what we have worked for. There is nothing else we can do. There is no way for us to know what will happen after we die.

## **Ecclesiastes 3:1-22**

### **Ecclesiastes 3 - The Reign of Time, A Glimmer of Hope**

#### **A. God and time.**

*1. (1-8) A time for every purpose.*

**To everything *there is* a season,  
A time for every purpose under heaven:  
A time to be born,  
And a time to die;  
A time to plant,  
And a time to pluck *what is* planted;  
A time to kill,  
And a time to heal;  
A time to break down,  
And a time to build up;  
A time to weep,  
And a time to laugh;  
A time to mourn,  
And a time to dance;  
A time to cast away stones,  
And a time to gather stones;**



**A time to embrace,  
And a time to refrain from embracing;  
A time to gain,  
And a time to lose;  
A time to keep,  
And a time to throw away;  
A time to tear,  
And a time to sew;  
A time to keep silence,  
And a time to speak;  
A time to love,  
And a time to hate;  
A time of war,  
And a time of peace.**

**a. To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven:** The poetry of this list – describing the different seasons and facets of life – is beautiful. Yet it also casts a dark shadow because it reminds us of the inevitability of trouble and evil, and of the relentless monotony of life.

i. “His ceaseless reiteration of the words, ‘A time... a time... a time,’ are intended to indicate his sense of the monotony of all things, rather than of their variety.” (Morgan)

ii. “The repetition of ‘a time..., and a time...’ begins to be oppressive. Whatever may be our skill and initiative, our real masters seem to be these inexorable seasons: not only those of the calendar, but that tide of events which moves us now to one kind of action which seems fitting, now to another which puts all into reverse.” (Kidner)

**b. A time to be born, and a time to die... a time to break down, and a time to build up:** A bad facet answers each good facet. The Preacher understood that

though there are good things in life, the bad things can't be escaped.

i. "Birth and death, the boundaries of life under the sun, are mentioned first." (Wright)

ii. **A time to kill:** Solomon did not tell us there was a time for murder. "Significantly, the Hebrew word used here for 'to kill,' is not the word reserved for murder in the sixth commandment, where premeditation seems to be in view." (Wright)

iii. **A time to dance:** The English Puritan commentator John Trapp seemed to be wary of this **time to dance**. "Here is nothing for mixed immodest dancings.... Where there is dancing, there the devil is, saith a Father: and cannot men be merry unless they have the devil for their playfellow? Dancing, saith another, is a circle, whose centre is the devil, but busily blowing up the fire of lust, as in Herod, that old goat." (Trapp)

iv. **A time to cast away stones:** In the ancient world they commonly scattered stones on an enemies' land to hinder farming.

v. The poetic quality of the list shows that even the tragic, dark aspects of life can be artfully – and powerfully – presented.

vi. This list also shows us the need to take full advantage of the time God gives us (Eph 5:16, Col 4:15). "Many a man loseth his soul, as Saul did his kingdom, by not discerning his time. Esau came too late; so did the foolish virgins. If the gale of grace be over-past, the gate shut, the drawbridge taken up, there is no possibility of entrance." (Trapp)

2. (9-11) *A glimmer of hope in seeing God as the master of time.*

**What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.**

a. **What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? I have seen the God-given task which the sons of men are to be occupied:** The Preacher asked the kind of question he had asked before; but this time he found an answer in **the God-given task** that God gives to man.

b. **He has made everything beautiful in its time:** This sense of balance considers the poetic list in the previous section. Solomon thought of the good and bad as they were described and understood that God **has made everything beautiful in its time.**

c. **Also He has put eternity in their hearts:** The Preacher understood that man has an awareness and a longing for the eternal, and that God has **put this in their hearts.** We can say that **eternity is in our hearts** because we are made in the image of an eternal God.

i. "God made man in his own image; and nothing more surely attests to the greatness of our origin that those faculties of the soul which are capable of yearning for, conceiving, and enjoying the Infinite, the Immortal, and the Divine.... Every appetite in nature and grace has its appropriate satisfaction." (Meyer)

ii. The well-known missionary and author Don Richardson used the phrase **eternity in their hearts** to describe the phenomenon of redemptive analogies in most all aboriginal cultures. Almost every culture has traditions, customs, or ways of thinking that

reflect basic Biblical truth, and these can be used by missionaries to explain the gospel.

d. **Except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end:** Though God has given man a longing for and awareness of eternity, God has not revealed very much about His eternal work. This keeps the yearning for **eternity** alive in the heart of man as a yet-to-be-fulfilled longing.

i. "The Preacher's vast researches have found nothing in the finite earthly realm which can satisfy the human heart intellectually or practically... This is the nearest he comes to Augustine's maxim: 'You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in you.'" (Eaton)

### *3. (12-15) What the Preacher knows.*

**I know that nothing *is* better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor – it *is* the gift of God.**

**I know that whatever God does,  
It shall be forever.**

**Nothing can be added to it,  
And nothing taken from it.**

**God does *it*, that men should fear before Him.**

**That which is has already been,**

**And what is to be has already been;**

**And God requires an account of what is past.**

a. **I know that nothing is better for them to rejoice, and to do good in their lives... and enjoy the good of all his labor – it is the gift of God:** In light of God's making **everything beautiful** and in His gift of **eternity in their hearts** – then it is wise to receive the good

things of this life, and to receive them as **the gift of God**.

i. **I know**: This “holds out again hope of an enjoyable life from the hand of God... sees such a life as man’s privilege.” (Eaton)

b. **I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever**: Here the Preacher escapes – ever so briefly – his *under the sun* thinking. It is not the mere mention of **God** that brings the escape; it is also the knowledge that God is eternal and that this *matters* to us (**God does it, that men should fear before Him**).

i. **I know**: This “shows the security of such a life is its divine guarantor... sees such a life... as God’s purpose.” (Eaton)

ii. Eaton sees three aspects of God’s action highlighted in Ecc 3:14 :

- God’s actions are permanent (**it shall be forever**).
- God’s actions are effective and complete (**nothing can be added to it**).
- God’s actions are totally secure (**nothing taken from it**).

iii. “All this leads on the part of man to *fear*, not a craven terror in the face of the monstrous or the unknown, but rather the opposite, reverence and awesome regard for God.” (Eaton)

c. **And God requires an account of what is past**: Again, this reflects a brief escape from *under the sun* thinking. If God judges the heart and deeds of man, then *everything* has meaning.

i. “God has no abortive enterprises or forgotten men. Once again Qoheleth has shown, in passing, that the

despair he describes is not his own, and need not be ours." (Kidner)

## **B. Injustice is unanswered by death.**

1. (16-17) *The problem of injustice and an uneasy assurance of solving this problem.*

**Moreover I saw under the sun:**

***In the place of judgment,***

***Wickedness was there;***

***And in the place of righteousness,***

***Iniquity was there.***

***I said in my heart,***

***"God shall judge the righteous and the wicked,***

***For there is a time there for every purpose and for every work."***

a. **I saw under the sun: in the place of judgment, wickedness was there:** Solomon looked at the world – the here and now world, apart from considering eternity – and saw that there was great evil and injustice. Instead of fair **judgment** he found **wickedness**; instead of **righteousness** he found **iniquity**.

i. "One of the greatest problems in understanding the total plan of God is that reward and punishment sometimes seem conspicuously absent." (Wright)

ii. This is a significant problem **under the sun**. If man does not have to reckon with eternity; if this life is all there is, then many of the wicked and evil people *win* and many good and righteous people *lose*. The idea of karma does not consistently work – at least not in this life.

b. **I said in my heart, "God shall judge the righteous and the wicked":** The Preacher said – perhaps hoped – that he knew God would judge **the righteous and the wicked**, and not only in this life.

Because **there is a time there for every purpose and for every work**, God will judge the deeds of man to see if it fit the proper **purpose** and **work**.

2. (18-21) *The common fate of animals and humans under the sun.*

**I said in my heart, "Concerning the condition of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are *like* animals." For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all *is* vanity. All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth?**

a. **Concerning the condition of the sons of men... they themselves are like animals:** Solomon looked at life among both humans and animals, and also compared their deaths – doing so in

*under the sun*, absent eternity terms. On this basis, he could say that there is little difference in the life and destiny between humans and animals.

i. **They themselves are like animals:** "The pronoun is repeated emphatically, 'that they themselves are [like] beasts, they in themselves.'" (Deane)

ii. "In their context these verses say that God makes all sensible people realize that they are as much subject to death as is the animal world." (Wright)

b. **As one dies, so dies the other:** The Preacher thought of an animal dying and its body decomposing. Then he thought that by all outward appearance, the same happens to a human body. Therefore, **they all**

**have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity.**

i. "The distinction between man and beast is annulled by death; the former's boasted superiority, his power of conceiving and planning, his greatness, skill, strength, cunning, all come under the category of vanity, as they cannot ward off the inevitable blow." (Deane)

ii. This is no argument for the doctrine of annihilationism, the idea that the unrighteous dead simply cease to exist, either immediately or after some time of punishment. It is no argument for two reasons. First, Solomon spoke here as a man unconvinced of eternity and the meaning it brings to life. Second, we believe what 2Ti 1:10 says: that Jesus *brought life and immortality to light through the gospel*. The understanding of the afterlife is cloudy and uncertain in the Old Testament, but much clearer in the New Testament.

**c. Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth:** We sense that the Preacher *hoped* there was a different destiny between people and animals. Yet in his *under the sun* thinking, there was no real reason to believe it – so, "**Who knows**"?

i. "What is meant by 'upward' and 'downward' may be seen by reference to the gnome in Pro 15:24, 'To the wise the way of life goeth upward, that he may depart from Sheol beneath.'" (Deane)

ii. "The Teacher is speaking phenomenologically, i.e., as things appear to the senses." (Wright)

3. (22) *Finding peace under the sun.*



**So I perceived that nothing *is* better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that *is* his heritage. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?**

a. **So I perceived:** It is true that Solomon **perceived** this, but he did so on the faulty assumptions of *under the sun* thinking.

b. **Nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works... who can bring him to see what will happen after him:** After briefly flirting with a confidence in eternity (Ecc 3:9-15), the Preacher has returned to his *under the sun* thinking. Under that premise, **nothing is better** than for a man to accomplish what he can in this world and try – the best he can – not to trouble himself about **what will happen after him**.

i. In his *under the sun* thinking, Solomon has an answer for the question, “**What will happen after him?**” The answer is, *nothing* – because death ends it all, and therefore ultimately his life has no more significance or meaning than the life of an animal.

## **Evil Under the Sun**

**Ecc 4:1** Then I looked again at all the injustice that goes on in this world. The oppressed were crying, and no one would help them. No one would help them, because their oppressors had power on their side.

Ecc 4:2 I envy those who are dead and gone; they are better off than those who are still alive.

Ecc 4:3 But better off than either are those who have never been born, who have never seen the injustice that goes on in this world.

Ecc 4:4 I have also learned why people work so hard to succeed: it is because they envy the things their neighbors

have. But it is useless. It is like chasing the wind.

Ecc 4:5 They say that we would be fools to fold our hands and let ourselves starve to death.

Ecc 4:6 Maybe so, but it is better to have only a little, with peace of mind, than be busy all the time with both hands, trying to catch the wind.

Ecc 4:7 I have noticed something else in life that is useless.

Ecc 4:8 Here is someone who lives alone. He has no son, no brother, yet he is always working, never satisfied with the wealth he has. For whom is he working so hard and denying himself any pleasure? This is useless, too—and a miserable way to live.

Ecc 4:9 Two are better off than one, because together they can work more effectively.

Ecc 4:10 If one of them falls down, the other can help him up. But if someone is alone and falls, it's just too bad, because there is no one to help him.

Ecc 4:11 If it is cold, two can sleep together and stay warm, but how can you keep warm by yourself ?

Ecc 4:12 Two people can resist an attack that would defeat one person alone. A rope made of three cords is hard to break.

Ecc 4:13 (13-14) Someone may rise from poverty to become king of his country, or go from prison to the throne, but if in his old age he is too foolish to take advice, he is not as well off as a young man who is poor but intelligent.

Ecc 4:15 I thought about all the people who live in this world, and I realized that somewhere among them there is a young man who will take the king's place.

Ecc 4:16 There may be no limit to the number of people a king rules; when he is gone, no one will be grateful for what he has done. It is useless. It is like chasing the wind.

# Ecclesiastes 4:1-16

## Ecclesiastes 4 - Bittersweet Accomplishments

### A. The tragedy of oppression.

1. (1) *The comfortless oppression of man **under the sun**.*

**Then I returned and considered all the oppression that is done under the sun:**

**And look! The tears of the oppressed,**

**But they have no comforter—**

**On the side of their oppressors *there is* power,**

**But they have no comforter.**

a. **I returned and considered all the oppression that is done under the sun:** After a brief flirtation with hope, the Preacher once again turned to despair at the end of Ecclesiastes 3 when he considered the problem of injustice. Continuing with that idea, he then **considered all the oppression that is done under the sun.**

i. "Compassion for the *oppressed* is common in the Old Testament." (Eaton)

- Oppression of people by a king (Pro 28:16).
- Oppression of a servant by his master (Deu 24:14).
- Oppression of the poor by the affluent (Pro 22:16).
- Oppression of the poor by the bureaucratic (Ecc 5:8).
- Oppression of the poor by other poor people (Pro 28:3).
- Oppression of the alien, the fatherless, and the widow (Jer 7:6; Eze 22:7; Zec 7:10).
- Oppression by charging high interest (Eze 22:12; Eze 22:29).

- Oppression by using false weights and measures (Hos 12:7).

b. **The tears of the oppressed, but they have no comforter:** Solomon thought of the painful and tear-filled lives of the oppressed. In an **under the sun** world – where this life is all there is, men and women give no account for their lives in a world to come – the **tears of the oppressed** are especially bitter and **they have no comforter**.

i. “Oh the tears for the oppressed; the tiny children; the terror-stricken fugitives from the Turk, the European trader, and the drunken tyrant of the home! Through all the centuries tears have flowed, enough to float a navy.” (Meyer)

2. (2-3) *Because of oppression and sadness, man is better off dead.*

**Therefore I praised the dead who were already dead,  
More than the living who are still alive.**

**Yet, better than both *is he* who has never existed,  
Who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.**

a. **Therefore I praised the dead who were already dead:** The thought of both oppressors and their victims finding no justice in eternity was so bitter to the Preacher that he thought the dead fortunate. In an **under the sun** world, the dead do not have to think about such painful things.

i. Solomon could only praise the dead this way because at his time he had no certain knowledge of the world to come, and he wrote most of Ecclesiastes with an *under the sun* premise. If he knew and accepted what happened to the unrighteous dead, he would never say such a thing. “Men, like silly fishes,

see one another caught and jerked out of the pond of life but they see not, alas! the fire and the pan into which they are cast that die in their sins.” (Trapp)

ii. **The dead who were already dead** is an interesting phrase. It implies that there are **the dead** who are not yet **dead** – the living dead, so to speak. They walk this earth and have biological life, but their spirit and soul seem dead.

b. **Better than both is he who has never existed, who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun:** Solomon took the idea of praising the dead even further, to where he no praised **he who has never existed**. Even the dead were once alive and had to see **the evil work that is done under the sun**.

i. “There is nothing sadder in the whole book than the wistful glance in verses 2 and 3 at the dead and the unborn, who are spared the sight of so much anguish.” (Kidner)

ii. Jesus Himself said there was one man for whom it would have been better if he had never been born: Judas (Mat 26:24).

iii. The Preacher’s great despair over the injustice of oppression in an **under the sun** premise shows the moral necessity of an afterlife and a coming judgment. Jesus told us that it is those who oppress and misuse their power who will ultimately endure punishment, not their victims (Mat 18:6-7).

## **B. Bittersweet accomplishments.**

*1. (4-6) Success often gains the envy of one’s neighbor.*

**Again, I saw that for all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.**

**The fool folds his hands  
And consumes his own flesh.  
Better a handful *with* quietness  
Than both hands full, *together with* toil and grasping  
for the wind.**

a. **For all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor:** The Preacher thought of those who gain success through **toil** and **skillful work** – and how it simply brought envy and sometimes hatred from others. This common jealousy of success made life seem like **vanity and grasping for the wind**.

i. "For if a man act uprightly and properly in the world, he soon becomes the object of his neighbour's envy and calumny too. Therefore the encouragement to do good, to act an upright part, is very little. This constitutes a part of the *vain* and *empty* system of human life." (Clarke)

b. **The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh:** Solomon here answered the tendency for those jealous of the success of others to be lazy. Like **fools**, they fold their hands and do nothing – and so waste away. Yet it wasn't the success of their neighbor that made them waste away; the foolish, lazy man **consumes his own flesh**.

i. **Consumes his own flesh:** "This expression is really equivalent to 'destroys himself,' 'brings ruin upon himself.'" (Deane) A similar thought from a different perspective is found in Psa 27:2.

c. **Better a handful with quietness than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind:** The Preacher reflects on the value of *contentment*. It is better to have less and be content (**with quietness**) than to have more and constantly be grasping for further success.

- i. Solomon weaved some fascinating themes together.
  - Hard work and success are good and not to be envied.
  - Laziness is wrong and destructive.
  - Yet even the one with full hands must learn contentment.

2. (7-8) *What good is your success if you can't pass it on?*

**Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun:  
There is one alone, without companion:  
He has neither son nor brother.  
Yet *there is* no end to all his labors,  
Nor is his eye satisfied with riches.  
*But he never asks,*  
“For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?”  
This also *is* vanity and a grave misfortune.**

a. **There is one alone, without companion:** Solomon thought of a man alone, without family or close friends.

b. **Yet there is no end to all his labors, nor is his eye satisfied with riches:** The man in Solomon's thinking works hard and wants to gain more and more.

c. **But he never asks, “For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good”:** The Preacher thought this unexamined life of hard work and success – without family and friends to share in it all – is **vanity and a grave misfortune**.

i. The Preacher was entirely correct from an *under the sun* perspective. Under that premise, there is no such thing as an eternal accomplishment and one does not even have the *potential* satisfaction of passing one's accomplishments on to another.

ii. “This picture of lonely, pointless busyness, equally with that of jealous rivalry in verse 4, checks any

excessive claims we might wish to make for the blessings of hard work.” (Kidner)

3. (9-12) *Without a friend, accomplishments are vain.*

**Two are better than one,  
Because they have a good reward for their labor.  
For if they fall, one will lift up his companion.  
But woe to him *who is* alone when he falls,  
For *he has* no one to help him up.  
Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm;  
But how can one be warm *alone*?  
Though one may be overpowered by another, two can  
withstand him.  
And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.**

a. **Two are better than one:** In the previous section Solomon thought how even in an *under the sun* world, living alone made life worse. He continues to develop the same idea, noting that **two are better than one** and will begin to state the reasons why this is true.

i. “Having looked at the poverty of the ‘loner’, whatever his outward success, we now reflect on something better; and *better* will be a key word here.” (Kidner)

b. **Because they have a good reward for their labor:** In a good partnership, two can accomplish more than each one individually. The sum will be greater than the parts.

c. **If they fall, one will lift us his companion:** When two work and live together they can help each other in difficult times – **but woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up.** The Preacher understood that everybody *needs* help, and it is a blessing both to give and to receive help.



d. **If two lie down together, they will keep warm; but how can one be warm alone:** When two work and live together they can bring comfort to the lives of each other.

e. **Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him:** When two work and live together, they can bring security and safety to each other. To use a familiar phrase, they can “watch the back” of one another.

i. These four verses show us the great value of human relationships, that **two are better than one**. Living and working together is a great advantage to living and working alone, and adds these four things to life:

- Productivity (**they have a good reward for their labor**).
- Help in need (**If they fall, one will lift up his companion**).
- Comfort in life (**they will keep warm**).
- Safety and security (**two can withstand**).

f. **A threefold cord is not quickly broken:** The Preacher gives a fascinating final line to this section dealing with the goodness of companionship. We might have expected that he would praise the strength of a *twofold* cord; instead he noted that **a threefold is not quickly broken**. It is commonly understood that the *third* cord is God Himself, and that a relationship intertwined with God is **a threefold cord that is not quickly broken**.

i. “The strength of the three-ply cord was proverbial in the ancient world.” (Eaton)

ii. This is commonly applied – and well applied – to the idea of recognizing and embracing God in the marriage relationship. Yet it is possible that, in the context of marriage and family, Solomon had

*children* in mind with the picture of **a threefold cord**.

*4. (13-16) The vanity of fame and its short life.*

**Better a poor and wise youth**

**Than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more.**

**For he comes out of prison to be king,**

**Although he was born poor in his kingdom.**

**I saw all the living who walk under the sun;**

**They were with the second youth who stands in his place.**

**There was no end of all the people over whom he was made king;**

**Yet those who come afterward will not rejoice in him.**

**Surely this also *is* vanity and grasping for the wind.**

a. **Better a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more:** The Preacher begins this section with a proverb, observing that it is better to be poor and wise (and young!) than to be old, foolish and have great wealth and status.

b. **He comes out of prison to be king:** Solomon thought of a second young man, who rose out of misfortune and obscurity to achieve great wealth, status, and fame (**there was no end of all the people over whom he was made king**).

c. **Yet those who come afterward will not rejoice in him:** As Solomon thought of this young man who achieved much and became famous, he understood that the fame would be short-lived. Even if it lasted his entire lifetime (which would be rare and remarkable), it would

not live on much beyond his own life. With his *under the sun* premise, this thought brought the familiar conclusion to the Preacher: **Surely this also is vanity and grasping for the wind.**

i. "He has reached a pinnacle of human glory, only to be stranded there. It is yet another of our human anticlimaxes and ultimately empty achievements."  
(Kidner)

## **Fear God**

**Ecc 5:1** Be careful about going to the Temple. It is better to go there to learn than to offer sacrifices like foolish people who don't know right from wrong.

Ecc 5:2 Think before you speak, and don't make any rash promises to God. He is in heaven and you are on earth, so don't say any more than you have to.

Ecc 5:3 The more you worry, the more likely you are to have bad dreams, and the more you talk, the more likely you are to say something foolish.

Ecc 5:4 So when you make a promise to God, keep it as quickly as possible. He has no use for a fool. Do what you promise to do.

Ecc 5:5 Better not to promise at all than to make a promise and not keep it.

Ecc 5:6 Don't let your own words lead you into sin, so that you have to tell God's priest that you didn't mean it. Why make God angry with you? Why let him destroy what you have worked for?

Ecc 5:7 No matter how much you dream, how much useless work you do, or how much you talk, you must still stand in awe of God.

## **The Vanity of Wealth and Honor**

Ecc 5:8 Don't be surprised when you see that the government oppresses the poor and denies them justice and

their rights. Every official is protected by someone higher, and both are protected by still higher officials.

Ecc 5:9 Even a king depends on the harvest.

Ecc 5:10 If you love money, you will never be satisfied; if you long to be rich, you will never get all you want. It is useless.

Ecc 5:11 The richer you are, the more mouths you have to feed. All you gain is the knowledge that you are rich.

Ecc 5:12 Workers may or may not have enough to eat, but at least they can get a good night's sleep. The rich, however, have so much that they stay awake worrying.

Ecc 5:13 Here is a terrible thing that I have seen in this world: people save up their money for a time when they may need it,

Ecc 5:14 and then lose it all in some bad deal and end up with nothing left to pass on to their children.

Ecc 5:15 We leave this world just as we entered it—with nothing. In spite of all our work there is nothing we can take with us.

Ecc 5:16 It isn't right! We go just as we came. We labor, trying to catch the wind, and what do we get?

Ecc 5:17 We get to live our lives in darkness and grief, worried, angry, and sick.

Ecc 5:18 Here is what I have found out: the best thing we can do is eat and drink and enjoy what we have worked for during the short life that God has given us; this is our fate.

Ecc 5:19 If God gives us wealth and property and lets us enjoy them, we should be grateful and enjoy what we have worked for. It is a gift from God.

Ecc 5:20 Since God has allowed us to be happy, we will not worry too much about how short life is.

## **Ecclesiastes 5:1-20**

## **Ecclesiastes 5 - Reverent Worship**

### **A. Worshipping God reverently.**

*1. (1-3) Come to the house of God more to hear and to obey than to speak.*

**Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil.**

**Do not be rash with your mouth,  
And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God.**

**For God *is* in heaven, and you on earth;  
Therefore let your words be few.**

**For a dream comes through much activity,  
And a fool's voice *is known* by *his* many words.**

a. **Walk prudently when you go to the house of God:** Solomon here brings good advice that does not contradict his *under the sun* premise. Even apart from eternity, it would be wise to honor God and **walk prudently when you go to the house of God** for the sake of this life alone.

b. **Walk prudently when you go to the house of God:** The Preacher will explain more of what this means in the coming lines. Yet generally we can say that it means to show care and think about consequences when we come to meet God.

i. "Fruitful and acceptable worship begins before it begins." (Maclaren)

c. **Draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools:** The **sacrifice of fools** is the hasty speech mentioned in the next lines. Solomon counsels us the come to the house of God **to hear** more than to speak without thinking.

i. **To hear:** "Has the double force in Hebrew which it sometimes has in English: to pay attention and to obey. So this saying is close to the famous words of Samuel, 'to obey (literally to listen) is better than sacrifice' (1Sa 15:22).\" (Kidner)

ii. "They who fall into the faults condemned are 'fools.' If that class includes all who mar their worship by such errors, the church which holds them had need to be of huge dimensions; for the faults held up in these ancient words flourish in full luxuriance to-day.\" (Maclaren)

iii. **Sacrifice:** "The *zebah* was an offering killed in sacrifice and then used for a meal, in contrast to the whole burnt-offering (*ola*) which was totally consumed in sacrifice. As Delitzsch points out, it is the *zebah* which could degenerate into thoughtless festivity, or worse.\" (Eaton)

d. **Do not be rash with your mouth... for God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few:** Solomon rightly described the human tendency to speak without thinking before God and others. Even with an *under the sun* premise, it is foolish to speak too much and hear too little in God's presence.

i. "When we come before God, our minds are full of our own business rather than with the worship of God. When we talk too much, we usually talk like fools. This can be especially bad in the house of God.\" (Wright)

ii. The priests of Baal prayed hard and long on Mount Carmel; Elijah prayed short and sweet, and full of faith to the living God. God heard and beautifully answered Elijah's prayer (1 Kings 18).

iii. J. Edwin Orr used to advise brief, earnest prayers, especially in prayer meetings. He said that when one prays in a meeting, for his first three minutes everyone prays *with* him. Should he continue a second three minutes, everyone prays *for* him. Should he continue for a third three minutes, the others start to pray *against* him.

iv. "For as it is not the loudness of a preacher's voice, but the weight and holiness of his matter, and the spirit of the preacher, that moves a wise and intelligent hearer, so it is not the labour of the lips, but the travail of the heart that prevails with God." (Trapp)

e. **A dream comes through much activity, and a fool's voice is known by his many words:** The thought in this line is probably well represented by the Living Bible: "Just as being too busy gives you nightmares, so being a fool makes you a blabbermouth."

i. "As personal and business cares produce dreams, which are unsubstantial things; so many words produce foolish and empty prayers." (Wright)

2. (4-7) *Keep your vows and fear God.*

**When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it;  
For *He* has no pleasure in fools.**

**Pay what you have vowed—**

**Better not to vow than to vow and not pay.**

**Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger of *God* that it *was* an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands? For in the multitude of dreams and many words *there is* also vanity. But fear God.**

a. **When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it:** Even with an *under the sun* premise, it is both honorable and wise to honor God by keeping one's word to Him. It would be **better not to vow than to vow and not pay.**

i. "God does not take broken vows lightly. A broken vow may incur his judgment upon our endeavours. One who 'swears to his own hurt and does not change' pleases God (Psa 15:4).\" (Eaton)

ii. A commonly overlooked and unappreciated sin among God's people is the sin of *broken vows* - promising things to God and failing to live up to the vow. Those who honor God:

- Will not be quick to make vows to God.
- Will be serious about fulfilling vows made.
- Will regard broken vows as sins to confessed and to be repented of.

b. **Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say... that it was an error:** The Preacher rightly observed that it was important for God's people to regard their *failure* to keep vows as a serious matter, and that great effort should be put into keeping vows and not regarding the failure to keep them as simply an **"error."**

i. **Say before the messenger of God that it was an error:** "Hebrew draws no distinction between *messenger* and *angel*, so several interpretations are open to us here.\" (Eaton)

c. **Fear God:** Solomon counseled reverence and honor towards God, but in his *under the sun* perspective the value is found in the here-and-now, not unto eternity.

i. "Most certainly, he that fears God need fear nothing else. Well may an upright soul say to *Satan* himself, I



fear God; and because I fear *him*, I do not fear *thee*.”  
(Clarke)

## **B. The vanity of wealth and materialism.**

### *1. (8-9) The enduring fact of oppression and injustice.*

**If you see the oppression of the poor, and the violent perversion of justice and righteousness in a province, do not marvel at the matter; for high official watches over high official, and higher officials are over them. Moreover the profit of the land is for all; even the king is served from the field.**

a. **If you see the oppression of the poor, and the violent perversion of justice... do not marvel at the matter:** The Preacher spoke realistically about life *under the sun*. There is much **oppression** and **perversion of justice**. It should surprise no one.

i. “For all his hatred of injustice, Qoheleth pins no hopes on utopian schemes or on revolution. He knows what is in man.” (Kidner)

b. **For high official watches over high official, and higher officials are over them:** Solomon was especially aware of how bureaucracies can bring oppression.

c. **Moreover the profit of the land is for all; even the king is served from the field:** Even with a complex (and possibly corrupt) bureaucracy, *everyone* depends on what comes from the farmer’s field – **even the king**. The Preacher seemed to delight in these ironies of life.

i. “Without the field he cannot have supplies for his own house; and, unless *agriculture* flourish, the necessary expenses of the state cannot be defrayed. Thus, God joins the *head* and *feet* together; for while the peasant is protected by the king as executor of

the laws, the king himself is dependent on the peasant; as the wealth of the nation is the fruit of the labourer's toil."

ii. "Some read it thus: *Rex agro servit*, The king is a servant to the field." (Trapp)

2. (10-12) *Dissatisfaction in the accumulation of wealth.*

**He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver;  
Nor he who loves abundance, with increase.**

**This also *is* vanity.**

**When goods increase,**

**They increase who eat them;**

**So what profit have the owners**

**Except to see *them* with their eyes?**

**The sleep of a laboring man *is* sweet,**

**Whether he eats little or much;**

**But the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep.**

a. **He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver:** Of all people, Solomon knew that the gathering of riches did not satisfy. He knew, **this also is vanity.**

i. "If anything is worse than the addiction money brings, it is the emptiness it leaves. Man, with eternity in his heart, needs better nourishment than this."  
(Kidner)

b. **When goods increase, they increase who eat them; so what profit have the owners:** Solomon knew that as one's net worth increased, so did one's expenses – *and* the expectation of others.

i. "Servants, friends, flatterers, trencher-men, pensioners, and other hangbys that will flock to a rich man, as crows do to a dead carcase, not to defend, but to devour it." (Trapp)

c. **The sleep of the laboring man is sweet... the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep:** Solomon indulged an envy of the **laboring man**, who has so much less to worry about. The **rich** man has greater worries and less **sleep**.

i. We may suppose that Solomon found little sympathy from **the laboring man**.

3. (13-17) *The uncertainty of wealth.*

**There is a severe evil which I have seen under the sun:**

**Riches kept for their owner to his hurt.**

**But those riches perish through misfortune;**

**When he begets a son, *there is* nothing in his hand.**

**As he came from his mother's womb, naked shall he return,**

**To go as he came;**

**And he shall take nothing from his labor**

**Which he may carry away in his hand.**

**And this also *is* a severe evil—**

**Just exactly as he came, so shall he go.**

**And what profit has he who has labored for the wind?**

**All his days he also eats in darkness,**

**And *he has* much sorrow and sickness and anger.**

a. **A severe evil... riches kept for their owner to his hurt:** Solomon then observed that wealth does not *bless* the life of every wealthy person. Especially those who keep their riches with an ungenerous, clenched fist, they are **riches kept for their owner to his hurt**.

i. "Rather, *preserved by the possessor*, hoarded and guarded, only to bring their lord added grief when by some reverse of fortune he loses them, as explained in what follows." (Deane)

**b. But those riches perish through misfortune... he shall take nothing from his labor:** This shows further the foolishness of holding on to wealth in an ungenerous way. Wealth can disappear suddenly **through misfortune**; yet we lose all wealth in death. Solomon knew that despite the burial wishes and customs of the pharaohs, one cannot take their wealth with them after death.

i. "The riches were suddenly and catastrophically lost, whether in foolish gambling, in a misguided venture, or in a sudden reversal of circumstances." (Eaton)

**c. Just exactly as he came, so shall he go:** Solomon understood that great wealth ultimately means nothing *under the sun*. Man comes with nothing into the world and leaves the same way.

i. The New Testament gives a more hopeful picture, taking us beyond the Preacher's *under the sun* premise and telling us that we can lay up treasure in heaven. You can't take your wealth with you when you die; but you can send it on ahead by generous giving to God's work.

**d. All his days he also eats in darkness, and he has much sorrow and sickness and anger:** With a sympathetic touch, Solomon tells us the loneliness, **sorrow**, and **anger** there is even for the very wealthy.

4. (18-20) *Making the best of a bad situation under the sun.*

**Here is what I have seen: *It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage. As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor – this is the gift***

**of God. For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps *him* busy with the joy of his heart.**

a. **It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun:** We sense that Solomon – still very much with the premise of *under the sun* – simply hoped to make the best of a bad situation.

b. **As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth... this is the gift of God:** Though the Preacher knew that riches did not bring true meaning to life, he was no fool. He understood that it was better to have wealth than to not have it, and *under the sun*, one should enjoy both wealth and the capacity to enjoy it as **the gift of God.**

i. “Indeed, the very care of wealth becomes a reason for restlessness. In view of all these things there is but one attitude, which the preacher advises: Do not hoard anything, but enjoy it.” (Morgan)

c. **For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart:** This was Solomon’s counsel to the wealthy man who finds no ultimate meaning *under the sun*. Simply, *try not to think about it and keep yourself busy.*

**Ecc 6:1** I have noticed that in this world a serious injustice is done.

Ecc 6:2 God will give us wealth, honor, and property, yes, everything we want, but then will not let us enjoy it. Some stranger will enjoy it instead. It is useless, and it just isn't right.

Ecc 6:3 We may have a hundred children and live a long time, but no matter how long we live, if we do not get our

share of happiness and do not receive a decent burial, then I say that a baby born dead is better off.

Ecc 6:4 It does that baby no good to be born; it disappears into darkness, where it is forgotten.

Ecc 6:5 It never sees the light of day or knows what life is like, but at least it has found rest—

Ecc 6:6 more so than the man who never enjoys life, though he may live two thousand years. After all, both of them are going to the same place.

Ecc 6:7 We do all our work just to get something to eat, but we never have enough.

Ecc 6:8 How are the wise better off than fools? What good does it do the poor to know how to face life?

Ecc 6:9 It is useless; it is like chasing the wind. It is better to be satisfied with what you have than to be always wanting something else.

Ecc 6:10 Everything that happens was already determined long ago, and we all know that you cannot argue with someone who is stronger than you.

Ecc 6:11 The longer you argue, the more useless it is, and you are no better off.

Ecc 6:12 How can anyone know what is best for us in this short, useless life of ours—a life that passes like a shadow? How can we know what will happen in the world after we die?

## **Ecclesiastes 6:1-12**

### **Ecclesiastes 6 - Wealth Can't Satisfy**

#### **A. The weakness of wealth**

*1. (1-2) Others can take one's wealth.*

**There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it *is* common among men: A man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor, so that he lacks**

**nothing for himself of all he desires; yet God does not give him power to eat of it, but a foreigner consumes it. This *is* vanity, and it *is* an evil affliction.**

**a. There is an evil which I have seen under the sun:** The Preacher still speaks from his **under the sun** premise.

b. **A man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor, so that he lacks nothing... yet God does not give him power to eat of it, but a foreigner consumes it:** Solomon saw the tragedy of those who are given great gifts from God – yet they do not have the opportunity to enjoy what God gives. Solomon understood this to be **vanity** and **an evil affliction**.

2. (3-6) *The meaninglessness of life that does not go beyond death.*

**If a man begets a hundred *children* and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with goodness, or indeed he has no burial, I say *that* a stillborn child *is* better than he – for it comes in vanity and departs in darkness, and its name is covered with darkness. Though it has not seen the sun or known *anything*, this has more rest than that man, even if he lives a thousand years twice – but has not seen goodness. Do not all go to one place?**

a. **If a man begets a hundred children and lives many years... but his soul is not satisfied with goodness:** The Preacher knew that a man could have all the outward signs of a good life – but still not be **satisfied with goodness**.

i. “One could have the things men dream of – which in Old Testament terms meant children by the score, and years of life by the thousand – and still depart unnoticed, unlamented, and unfulfilled.” (Kidner)

ii. “Like the Mosaic law (*cf. Gal 3:22*), the Preacher is slamming every door except the door of faith.” (Eaton)

b. **I say that a stillborn child is better than he:** This is a bitter statement, the kind we might expect from one



who had suffered like Job (Job 3). Yet Solomon – with all his blessings and advantages – felt and knew the same despair of life as Job had. Life seemed so meaningless that he felt it would be better if he had never been born.

i. “To die unburied was the mark of a despised and unmourned end. Better to miscarry at birth than to miscarry throughout life.” (Eaton)

c. **Though it has not seen the sun or known anything, this has more rest than that man, even if he lives a thousand years twice – but has not seen goodness:** In Solomon’s mind, the stillborn child – tragic as it is – is better off than the man who knows the crushing disappointment of the realization of meaninglessness, **even if he lives a thousand years.**

d. **Do not all go to one place:** Solomon writes with his *under the sun* perspective, and shares much of the Old Testament uncertainty about the afterlife.

## **B. What good is it all?**

1. (7-9) *Suffering under dissatisfaction.*

**All the labor of man *is* for his mouth,  
And yet the soul is not satisfied.**

**For what more has the wise *man* than the fool?**

**What does the poor man have,**

**Who knows *how* to walk before the living?**

**Better *is* the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire.**

**This also *is* vanity and grasping for the wind.**

a. **All the labor of man is for his mouth, and yet the soul is not satisfied:** Man works for the very bread he eats, yet it does not satisfy his soul. Solomon sensed what Moses had already said and Jesus later repeated: *Man does not live by bread alone* (Deu 8:3, Mat 3:4).

b. **What more has the wise man than the fool:** Wisdom itself can't fill a hungry man's stomach. For all the superiority of the **wise man** compared to the fool, they both get hungry. Being **wise** isn't as much of an advantage as commonly thought.

i. "The necessities of life are the same to both, and their *condition* in life is nearly similar; liable to the same diseases, dissolution, and death." (Clarke)

c. **Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire:** The Preacher knew that in a world of such uncertainty and absence of meaning, that what one can actually see is always better than what one merely desires.

2. (10-12) *The futility of feeling that nothing can make it better.*

**Whatever one is, he has been named already,  
For it is known that he *is* man;  
And he cannot contend with Him who is mightier than  
he.**

**Since there are many things that increase vanity,  
How *is* man the better?**

**For who knows what *is* good for man in life, all the  
days of his vain life which he passes like a shadow?  
Who can tell a man what will happen after him under  
the sun?**

a. **Whatever one is, he has been named already:** This is a fatalistic view of God's sovereignty. The idea is that God is completely in control, and **whatever one is**, it is because the all-powerful God has **named** it already.

i. "Since God is supreme, he has surely predestined everything and has made man too weak to resist. Reasoning, complaining, and arguing bring no answer and lead to further frustration." (Wright)

**b. He cannot contend with Him who is mightier than he:** Solomon's great frustration is rooted in the understanding that man is man, God is God, and man can never successfully **contend with Him who is mightier than he.**

i. Many today refuse to know what the Preacher knew. They believe that when they face God (abandoning Solomon's *under the sun* premise) they will in fact **contend with Him**, and tell God a thing or two. Such are seriously and sadly deluded.

ii. "God will have the better of those that contend with him: and his own reason will tell him that it is not fit that God should cast down the bucklers first: and that the deeper a man wades, the more he shall be wet."  
(Trapp)

**c. Since there are many things that increase vanity, how is man the better:** The Preacher felt that life was a game that could not be won. There were too many **things that increase vanity** that ultimately man would become **no better.**

i. "Evidently the thought of the preacher is that the more a man possesses under the sun, the more profoundly conscious does he become of the vanity and vexation of it all." (Morgan)

**d. For who knows what is good for man in life:** We often *think* we know what is **good** for us; but do we really? In the course of a life, which is better: Wealth or poverty? Health or sickness? Fame or obscurity? Many who have what is commonly thought of as **good** are not the better for it.

**e. All the days of his vain life which he passes like a shadow? Who can tell a man what will happen after him under the sun:** Solomon looked to life and it

seemed **vain** and a **shadow**. He looked to death and saw only darkness and uncertainty. To this point there is little relief from the tragedy of meaninglessness of life (and death) *under the sun*.

i. "So the chapter will wind its way down to a depressing and uncertain finish, well suited to the state of man on his own." (Kidner)

ii. We can explain Solomon's lack of knowledge of the afterlife by understanding the principle of 2Ti 2:10 : that Jesus Christ *brought life and immortality to light through the gospel*. The understanding of immortality was at best cloudy in the Old Testament but is much clearer in the New Testament. For example, we can say that Jesus knew fully what He was talking about when He described hell and judgment (such as in Mat 25:41-46). We therefore rely on the *New Testament* for our understanding of the afterlife, much more than the *Old*.

iii. We also understand that this does not in any way take away from the truth of the Bible and the Book of Ecclesiastes. What is true is that Solomon actually wrote this and actually believed it (with his *under the sun* premise); the truth of the statement itself must be evaluated according to the rest of the Bible.

## **The Contrast of Wisdom and Folly**

**Ecc 7:1** A good reputation is better than expensive perfume; and the day you die is better than the day you are born.

Ecc 7:2 It is better to go to a home where there is mourning than to one where there is a party, because the living should always remind themselves that death is waiting for us all.

Ecc 7:3 Sorrow is better than laughter; it may sadden your face, but it sharpens your understanding.

Ecc 7:4 Someone who is always thinking about happiness is a fool. A wise person thinks about death.

Ecc 7:5 It is better to have wise people reprimand you than to have stupid people sing your praises.

Ecc 7:6 When a fool laughs, it is like thorns crackling in a fire. It doesn't mean a thing.

Ecc 7:7 You may be wise, but if you cheat someone, you are acting like a fool. If you take a bribe, you ruin your character.

Ecc 7:8 The end of something is better than its beginning. Patience is better than pride.

Ecc 7:9 Keep your temper under control; it is foolish to harbor a grudge.

Ecc 7:10 Never ask, "Oh, why were things so much better in the old days?" It's not an intelligent question.

Ecc 7:11 Everyone who lives ought to be wise; it is as good as receiving an inheritance

Ecc 7:12 and will give you as much security as money can. Wisdom keeps you safe—this is the advantage of knowledge.

Ecc 7:13 Think about what God has done. How can anyone straighten out what God has made crooked?

Ecc 7:14 When things are going well for you, be glad, and when trouble comes, just remember: God sends both happiness and trouble; you never know what is going to happen next.

Ecc 7:15 My life has been useless, but in it I have seen everything. Some good people may die while others live on, even though they are evil.

Ecc 7:16 So don't be too good or too wise—why kill yourself ?

Ecc 7:17 But don't be too wicked or too foolish, either—why die before you have to?

Ecc 7:18 Avoid both extremes. If you have reverence for God, you will be successful anyway.

Ecc 7:19 Wisdom does more for a person than ten rulers can do for a city.

Ecc 7:20 There is no one on earth who does what is right all the time and never makes a mistake.

Ecc 7:21 Don't pay attention to everything people say—you may hear your servant insulting you,

Ecc 7:22 and you know yourself that you have insulted other people many times.

Ecc 7:23 I used my wisdom to test all of this. I was determined to be wise, but it was beyond me.

Ecc 7:24 How can anyone discover what life means? It is too deep for us, too hard to understand.

Ecc 7:25 But I devoted myself to knowledge and study; I was determined to find wisdom and the answers to my questions, and to learn how wicked and foolish stupidity is.

Ecc 7:26 I found something more bitter than death—the woman who is like a trap. The love she offers you will catch you like a net, and her arms around you will hold you like a chain. A man who pleases God can get away, but she will catch the sinner.

Ecc 7:27 Yes, said the Philosopher, I found this out little by little while I was looking for answers.

Ecc 7:28 I have looked for other answers but have found none. I found one man in a thousand that I could respect, but not one woman.

Ecc 7:29 This is all that I have learned: God made us plain and simple, but we have made ourselves very complicated.

## **Ecclesiastes 7:1-29**

## **Ecclesiastes 7 - Trying to Find a Better Way**

### **A. Looking at life through better and worse.**

*1. (1-4) Better in life and death.*

**A good name *is* better than precious ointment,  
And the day of death than the day of one's birth;  
Better to go to the house of mourning  
Than to go to the house of feasting,  
For that *is* the end of all men;  
And the living will take *it* to heart.  
Sorrow *is* better than laughter,  
For by a sad countenance the heart is made better.  
The heart of the wise *is* in the house of mourning,  
But the heart of fools *is* in the house of mirth.**

a. **A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death better than the day of one's birth:** At the end of Ecclesiastes 6, the Preacher was in a mournful, discouraged mood as he considered the meaninglessness of life in a world without eternity and accountability in the world beyond. He continued that tone by coupling an obvious truth (**a good name is better than precious ointment**) with a more startling statement (**the day of death better than the day of one's birth**).

i. This comes from the deep and pained sense of meaninglessness that the Preacher suffered under. It made him feel that **death** was better than life.

ii. "Nothing in the first half of verse 1 prepares us for the body-blow of the second half... Instead of reflecting and arguing, he will bombard us with proverbs, with their strong impact and varied angles of attack." (Kidner)

iii. Even **the day of one's birth** is ominous, despite all the hopes and potential in a baby's birth. Children

come into the world uttering the *human sound* – a scream. “Before ever a child speak, he prophesies, by his tears, of his ensuing sorrows.” (Trapp)

iv. From a New Testament perspective, we have mixed feelings about the Preacher’s outburst, “**The day of death better than the day of one’s birth.**” On the one hand, **the day of death** is glorious for the believer – our battle is over, our sorrow is over, our uncertainty is over – and all things are new. On the other hand, we rejoice in the meaning God has given us with this life on earth. We agree with the Apostle Paul in Php 1:23 : *For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.*

v. “Death is the end of dying. On the day of the believer’s death dying is for ever done with. The saints who are with God shall never die any more. Life is wrestling, struggling; but death is the end of conflict: it is rest-victory.” (Spurgeon)

vi. “Hence all the ancient fathers called those days wherein the martyrs suffered their birthdays, because they began to live indeed.” (Trapp)

vii. “Consider it spiritually, and, dear brethren, what is a good name? A good name is a name that is written in the Lamb’s book of life, and that is better than the sweetest of all ointments.” (Spurgeon)

b. **Better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting:** Solomon knew our tendency to simply *ignore* or *wish away* death. It is better to be squarely confronted with the reality of death, and **the house of mourning** is a fine place to **take it to heart**.

i. It seems that the Preacher has rejected his previous hope of finding the meaning of life in



pleasure, accomplishment, and wisdom. Now there is only death, and one should not ignore it. *So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.* (Psa 90:12)

ii. "Some of the old Romish monks always read their Bibles with a candle stuck in a skull. The light from a death's head may be an awful one, but it is a very profitable one." (Spurgeon)

c. **Sorrow is better than laughter:** The Preacher goes against all intuition; who among us would say this? Yet he is determined to sweep away our illusions and wishes about the nature of life in his *under the sun* premise.

i. Rejecting Solomon's general premise, we do not believe that **sorrow is always better than laughter**. We do not reject it because we prefer an illusion or a wish; we do it out of firm confidence in a God to whom we answer in eternity, and who has promised to reward good and punish evil there. Even so – there *is* often more wisdom **in the house of mourning** than **in the house of mirth**.

2. (5-9) *Better in wisdom and folly.*

***It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise  
Than for a man to hear the song of fools.  
For like the crackling of thorns under a pot,  
So is the laughter of the fool.  
This also is vanity.  
Surely oppression destroys a wise man's reason,  
And a bribe debases the heart.  
The end of a thing is better than its beginning;  
The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.  
Do not hasten in your spirit to be angry,  
For anger rests in the bosom of fools.***

a. **It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than for a man to hear the song of fools:** The Preacher continues his previous thought, that man finds wisdom in adversity and suffering than in ease and comfort. The **laughter of the fool** is nothing more than a momentary sound, leaving nothing of substance behind.

i. "The pun 'Like the sound of *sirim* (thorns) under the *sir* (pot, cauldron)' is caught by Moffatt's *Like nettles crackling under kettles*. Thorns were a rapidly burning, easily extinguishable fuel in the ancient world." (Eaton)

ii. "They make a great noise, a great blaze; and are extinguished in a few moments. Such indeed, comparatively, are the joys of life; they are noisy, flashy, and transitory." (Clarke)

iii. "Their laughter is also fitly compared to thorns, because it chokes good motions, scratcheth the conscience, harbours the vermin of base and baggage lusts." (Trapp)

b. **Surely oppression destroys a wise man's reason:** For all of Solomon's praise of the instructive role of adversity, he also understood that suffering also had its limit. It could destroy **a wise man's reason**.

c. **Do not hasten your spirit to be angry:** After two proverbs celebrating patience, the Preacher warns us against impatience leading to anger. Living with an *under the sun* premise may easily make a person impatient and then angry, and **anger rests in the bosom of fools**.

3. (10-12) *Wisdom gives perspective.*

**Do not say,**

**"Why were the former days better than these?"**

**For you do not inquire wisely concerning this.**

**Wisdom is good with an inheritance,**

**And profitable to those who see the sun.  
For wisdom *is* a defense as money *is* a defense,  
But the excellence of knowledge *is that* wisdom gives  
life to those who have it.**

a. **Do not say, “Why were the former days better than these”:** Solomon understood our tendency to romanticize the past and think that it was better than our current time. He cautioned against it, knowing that the meaninglessness of life with his *under the sun* premise is not a new phenomenon.

i. “The clear-eyed Qoheleth is the last person to be impressed by this golden haze around the past: he has already declared that one age is very much like another. ‘What has been is what will be... and there is nothing new under the sun’ (Ecc 1:9).” (Kidner)

ii. “Even Christians sometimes overestimate the early church, the Reformation, or periods of revival. Wise people certainly learn from the past, but they live in the present with all its opportunities.” (Wright)

iii. “In former days men were wicked as they are now, and religion was unfashionable: God also is the same *now* as he was *then*; as just, as merciful, as ready to help: and there is no depravity in the age that will excuse your crimes, your follies, and your carelessness.” (Clarke)

b. **Wisdom is good with an inheritance, and profitable to those who see the sun:** With the Preacher’s premise, the best kind of life is found with wisdom and money (**an inheritance**). This **wisdom** – called also **excellence of knowledge** – gives whatever life can be had in an *under the sun* world.

4. (13-14) *Wisdom in considering God.*

**Consider the work of God;  
For who can make straight what He has made  
crooked?  
In the day of prosperity be joyful,  
But in the day of adversity consider:  
Surely God has appointed the one as well as the  
other,  
So that man can find out nothing *that will come* after  
him.**

a. **Consider the work of God; for who can make straight what He has made crooked:** Understanding the relative place of man to God is important in peaceful acceptance with life *under the sun*. From the Preacher's perspective, this has the sense of fatalism.

i. "There is no standing before a lion, no hoisting up a sail in a tempest, no contending with the Almighty."  
(Trapp)

b. **In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider:** Solomon counsels us how to take the good and the bad of life into perspective. "Take what life gives you and get along the best you can."

c. **Surely God has appointed the one as well as the other, so that man can find out nothing that will come after him:** The Preacher here drifts again toward despair. Considering God's control of all things leads him to believe that the system is set so that we can know nothing of what is beyond us, of what **will come after him**.

## **B. Living a better life under the sun.**

1. (15-18) *Dangers along the way.*

**I have seen everything in my days of vanity:  
There is a just *man* who perishes in his  
righteousness,**

**And there is a wicked *man* who prolongs *life* in his wickedness.**

**Do not be overly righteous,**

**Nor be overly wise:**

**Why should you destroy yourself?**

**Do not be overly wicked,**

**Nor be foolish:**

**Why should you die before your time?**

***It is good that you grasp this,***

**And also not remove your hand from the other;**

**For he who fears God will escape them all.**

**a. I have seen everything in my days of vanity:**

Solomon complained that in his meaningless life he has seen the good suffer (**a just man who perishes in his righteousness**) and the wicked prosper (**prolongs his life in his wickedness**). Solomon mourns, *it isn't fair*.

i. "The first man that died, died for religion. How early did martyrdom come into the world!" (Trapp)

**b. Do not be overly righteous, nor be overly wise...**

**do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish:** In light of the apparent **vanity** of life, Solomon here recommended a *balanced* approach to living. Be

**righteous**, but not too much; be **wise**, but not too much; be **wicked**, but not too much; be **foolish**, but not too much.

i. "Righteousness does not always pay. Wickedness sometimes does. Therefore morality is to be a thing of calculation." (Morgan)

ii. This is a common approach to life, thinking that everything is good in moderation. This has some truth to it but does not define a wise or good life. We should remember that both Jesus and Paul (as well as many others) were not considered balanced individuals in

their day. Their understanding of eternity and accountability made them – in the view of many – *unbalanced*.

2. (19-22) *The need of wisdom.*

**Wisdom strengthens the wise**

**More than ten rulers of the city.**

**For *there is* not a just man on earth who does good**

**And does not sin.**

**Also do not take to heart everything people say,**

**Lest you hear your servant cursing you.**

**For many times, also, your own heart has known**

**That even you have cursed others.**

a. **Wisdom strengthens the wise:** A wise man – even with an *under the sun* premise – will see and appreciate the value of **wisdom**, that it gives more strength **than ten rulers of the city**.

b. **There is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin:** A wise man understands the sinfulness of man – and his own sinfulness.

c. **Do not take to heart everything people say... even you have cursed others:** Wisely, the Preacher knew that we tend to take the words of others about us too seriously. People often say unguarded things that are not deeply felt; we say such things about others and would not want them to **take to heart** what we said.

i. In his book *Lectures to My Students*, Charles Spurgeon gave a chapter to this verse, which he titled “The Blind Eye and the Deaf Ear.” In that chapter he gave wise advice to pastors and Christian workers that they should sometimes (if not often) simply overlook unkind and thoughtless things others say and do. We would not want to be judged by our worst moments; we should not judge others by theirs.

- ii. "The fact that we often speak ill of others should make us less open to take offence at what is said of ourselves, and prepared to expect unfavorable comments." (Deane)

3. (23-25) *Frustration in seeking wisdom.*

**All this I have proved by wisdom.**

**I said, "I will be wise";**

**But it was far from me.**

**As for that which is far off and exceedingly deep,**

**Who can find it out?**

**I applied my heart to know,**

**To search and seek out wisdom and the reason of things,**

**To know the wickedness of folly,**

**Even of foolishness and madness.**

- a. **All this I have proved by wisdom. I said, "I will be wise"; but it was far from me:** As the Preacher gives wise advice for living, he understood that his desire to be wise was not always fulfilled with true wisdom.

- i. "The honest admission of failure to find wisdom – of watching it in fact recede with every step one takes, discovering that none of our soundings ever gets to the bottom of things – this is, if not the beginning of wisdom, a good path to that beginning." (Kidner)

- b. **I applied my heart to know, to search and seek out wisdom and the reason of things:** Given his *under the sun* premise, his meaningless life could not be made meaningful by the attainment of wisdom.

4. (26-29) *Searching for wisdom, the Preacher sees man's sinfulness.*

**And I find more bitter than death**

**The woman whose heart *is* snares and nets,**

**Whose hands *are* fetters.**

**He who pleases God shall escape from her,  
But the sinner shall be trapped by her.  
“Here is what I have found,” says the Preacher,  
“ Adding one thing to the other to find out the reason,  
Which my soul still seeks but I cannot find:  
One man among a thousand I have found,  
But a woman among all these I have not found.  
Truly, this only I have found:  
That God made man upright,  
But they have sought out many schemes.”**

**a. I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are fetters:**  
In his unsatisfying search for wisdom, Solomon understood that a woman could be a danger and a trap. It was important to not let that happen; **he who pleases God shall escape from her.**

**i. But the sinner shall be trapped by her:** “In her, in the snare which is herself.” (Deane) “The wanton woman, that shame of her sex. A bitch, Moses calls her (Deu 23:18).” (Trapp)

**ii.** Knowing Solomon wrote this, it makes us wish we knew more about *when* Solomon wrote this; at what point in his life. We know from 1Ki 11:4 : *For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God.* Surely, Solomon himself was caught in these **snares** and **nets** and **fetters**.

**iii.** Those who think that Ecclesiastes is the statement of Solomon’s repentance and evidence that he turned his heart back to *the LORD his God*, this section is Solomon’s way of saying, “I understood my error and turned from it.” Those who are unsure of Solomon’s repentance will place the writing of Ecclesiastes earlier in his life.



iv. All in all it is a fascinating question, and one (in the mind of this writer) that has no definitive answer: Was Solomon one who pleased God in escaping from this trap, or was he the sinner **trapped by her**?

**b. I cannot find: One man among a thousand I have found. But a woman among all these I have not found:** Solomon could find a rare man in **a thousand** with wisdom; but not even one **woman**. This speaks more about Solomon's choice of female companionship than it does about the relative wisdom of men and women.

i. "His fruitless search for a woman he could trust may tell us as much about him and his approach, as about any of his acquaintances." (Kidner)

ii. "Such as he knew her to be in Oriental courts and homes, denied her proper position, degraded, uneducated, all natural affections crushed or underdeveloped, the plaything of her lord, to be flung aside at any moment. It is not surprising that Koheleth's impression of the female sex should be unfavorable." (Deane)

iii. "He found that a harem did not provide the appropriate companion for man. How much better he would have been with one good wife, such as he speaks of in Ecc 9:9 and Proverbs 31!" (Wright)

**c. This only I have found: That God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes:** Solomon understood that God made man without sin, but man has – since the time of Adam – **sought out many schemes** of sin and rebellion against God.

i. We take Solomon's statement "**God made man upright**" not to refer to each individual, but to man as he was originally made, to Adam and Eve in the

Garden of Eden. "He was created neither sinful, nor neutral, but *upright*, a word used of the state of the heart which is disposed to faithfulness or obedience." (Eaton)

ii. "Since futility was not the first word about our world, it no longer has to be the last." (Kidner)

### **Keep the King's Command**

**Ecc 8:1** Only the wise know what things really mean. Wisdom makes them smile and makes their frowns disappear.

Ecc 8:2 Do what the king says, and don't make any rash promises to God.

Ecc 8:3 The king can do anything he likes, so depart from his presence; don't stay in such a dangerous place.

Ecc 8:4 The king acts with authority, and no one can challenge what he does.

Ecc 8:5 As long as you obey his commands, you are safe, and a wise person knows how and when to do it.

Ecc 8:6 There is a right time and a right way to do everything, but we know so little!

Ecc 8:7 None of us knows what is going to happen, and there is no one to tell us.

Ecc 8:8 No one can keep from dying or put off the day of death. That is a battle we cannot escape; we cannot cheat our way out.

Ecc 8:9 I saw all this when I thought about the things that are done in this world, a world where some people have power and others have to suffer under them.

### **Those Who Fear God Will Do Well**

Ecc 8:10 Yes, I have seen the wicked buried and in their graves, but on the way back from the cemetery people

praise them in the very city where they did their evil. It is useless.

Ecc 8:11 Why do people commit crimes so readily? Because crime is not punished quickly enough.

Ecc 8:12 A sinner may commit a hundred crimes and still live. Oh yes, I know what they say: "If you obey God, everything will be all right,

Ecc 8:13 but it will not go well for the wicked. Their life is like a shadow and they will die young, because they do not obey God."

### **Man Cannot Know God's Ways**

Ecc 8:14 But this is nonsense. Look at what happens in the world: sometimes the righteous get the punishment of the wicked, and the wicked get the reward of the righteous. I say it is useless.

Ecc 8:15 So I am convinced that we should enjoy ourselves, because the only pleasure we have in this life is eating and drinking and enjoying ourselves. We can at least do this as we labor during the life that God has given us in this world.

Ecc 8:16 Whenever I tried to become wise and learn what goes on in the world, I realized that you could stay awake night and day

Ecc 8:17 and never be able to understand what God is doing. However hard you try, you will never find out. The wise may claim to know, but they don't.

## **Ecclesiastes 8:1-17**

### **Ecclesiastes 8 - Wisdom and Mystery**

#### **A. More good advice for life "under the sun"**

*1. (1-4) Wisdom in obeying and honoring the king.*

**Who *is* like a wise *man*?**

**And who knows the interpretation of a thing?**

**A man's wisdom makes his face shine,**

**And the sternness of his face is changed.**

**I say, "Keep the king's commandment for the sake of your oath to God. Do not be hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand for an evil thing, for he does whatever pleases him."**

**Where the word of a king *is*, *there is* power;**

**And who may say to him, "What are you doing?"**

a. **Who is like a wise man:** Solomon searched for a wise man, who knew **the interpretation of a thing**. Solomon knew that wisdom makes a man happier, even in an *under the sun* premise (**makes his face shine... the sternness of his face is changed**).

i. "The shining *face* generally speaks of favour (*cf. Num 6:25*). Here it speaks of the wise man who is visibly gracious in his demeanour, and (as the next phrase says) whose gentleness is obvious in his facial expression." (Eaton)

b. **Keep the king's commandment for the sake of your oath to God:** The Preacher understood what the Apostle Paul would later write in Romans 13 – that we should obey government authority as part of our obedience to God.

i. We do this primarily not to honor the **king** or government authority (though this is part of our obligation). Primarily, we honor government authority **for the sake of our oath to God**. In a New Covenant context, we do it as part of our obedience to God.

ii. "You have sworn obedience to him; keep your oath, for the engagement was made in the *presence of*

*God*. It appears that the Jewish princes and chiefs took an oath of fidelity to their kings. This appears to have been done to *David*, 2Sa 5:1-3; to *Joash*, 2Ki 11:17; and to *Solomon*, 1Ch 29:24." (Clarke)

iii. We can agree with Solomon's advice here, from both an Old Testament and New Testament perspective. Yet one must say that it sounds self-serving coming from Solomon, who was a king himself.

iv. We also recognize that we are always to obey God rather than man if the two contradict (Act 4:19). "Many passages in the Old Testament witness to the limits which loyalty to God must set on courtly tact and submissiveness." (Kidner)

**c. Where the word of a king is, there is power; and who may say to him, "What are you doing":** This is a reason why it is wise to obey a king. Their power – though sometimes held unrighteously – makes it unwise to fail to **keep the king's commandment** or show him respect.

i. This also makes us reflect on our obedience to God as the Great King. "If he be a King, then it is a solemn hazard to your soul if you come short of the least of his commandments. Remember that one treason makes a traitor; one leak sinks a ship; one fly spoils the whole box of ointment. He that bought us with his blood deserves to be obeyed in all things with all our heart, and mind, and soul, and strength." (Spurgeon)

*2. (5-9) Reasons for wise living.*

**He who keeps his command will experience nothing harmful;**

**And a wise man's heart discerns both time and**

judgment,  
Because for every matter there is a time and judgment,  
Though the misery of man increases greatly.  
For he does not know what will happen;  
So who can tell him when it will occur?  
No one has power over the spirit to retain the spirit,  
And no one has power in the day of death.  
*There is* no release from that war,  
And wickedness will not deliver those who are given to it.

All this I have seen, and applied my heart to every work that is done under the sun: *There is* a time in which one man rules over another to his own hurt.

a. **He who keeps his command will experience nothing harmful:** Good will come to those who obey and honor the king.

b. **Because for every matter there is a time and judgment:** Wisdom knows what Solomon first poetically explained in Ecc 3:1-8 – that there is a time and purpose for everything under heaven.

c. **Though the misery of man increases greatly. For he does not know what will happen:** The Preacher understood that **for every matter there is a time and judgment**; but he also knew that we don't know what those times are. A wise man's heart may discern **both time and judgment**, but certainly not perfectly; and not all are wise.

i. "The highest wisdom is submission to things as they are... Yet in doing all this there will abide in the heart the recognition of abounding injustice." (Morgan)

d. **No one has power over the spirit to retain the spirit, and no one has power in the day of death:** If

the lack of wisdom discouraged Solomon in Ecc 8:6-7, he found the powerlessness of man in the face of death to be yet more despairing. *Under the sun*, he saw that **death** allows no winners, and **there is no release from that war**.

e. **All this I have seen... there is a time in which one man rules over another to his own hurt**: The Preacher knew that part of man's misery on this earth was to be ruled by others oppressively.

i. "This may be spoken of rulers generally, who, instead of *feeding, fleece the flock*; tyrants and oppressors, who come to an untimely end by their mismanagement of the offices of the state. All these things relate to *Asiatic* despots, and have ever been more applicable to *them* than to any other sovereigns in the world. They were despotic; they still are so." (Clarke)

## **B. Even wisdom doesn't answer the big questions.**

1. (10-13) *Why are the deeds of the wicked soon forgotten?*

**Then I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of holiness, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done. This also is vanity. Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. Though a sinner does evil a hundred *times*, and his *days* are prolonged, yet I surely know that it will be well with those who fear God, who fear before Him. But it will not be well with the wicked; nor will he prolong *his* days, *which* are as a shadow, because he does not fear before God.**

a. **I saw the wicked buried... they were forgotten in the city where they had so done**: Solomon saw that

the **wicked** die, and their evil is soon forgotten instead of being memorialized in infamy. With his *under the sun* premise, Solomon despaired that *the wicked dead are not punished after death*.

i. "I have seen wicked men buried and as their friends returned from the cemetery, having forgotten all the dead man's evil deeds, these men were praised in the very city where they had committed their crimes!" (Living Bible)

b. **Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men us fully set in them to do evil:** If wicked men are often not punished after death, they also are often not punished in this life. All this added to the sense of life's meaninglessness for Solomon.

i. This also speaks of the hardened response many make to the mercy and forbearance of God toward them. "Man's godless ingratitude is as deep a mystery as is God's loving patience. It is strange that, with such constant failure of His love to win, God should still persevere in it." (Maclaren)

c. **I surely know that it will be well with those who fear God, who fear before Him. But it will not be well with the wicked:** In context, we can suppose that the Preacher said this as a hope or a wish, rather than with real confidence. He *wishes* this were true but cannot have confidence that it is while clinging to his *under the sun* premise.

2. (14) *Why do the bad have it good and the good have it bad?*

**There is a vanity which occurs on earth, that there are just *men* to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked; again, there are wicked *men* to whom**



**it happens according to the work of the righteous. I said that this also *is* vanity.**

a. **There are just men to whom it happens according to the wicked:** Solomon, speaking from his eternity-excluding viewpoint, felt this made life meaningless (**vanity**). Why do good men and women suffer?

i. This was the great question of the Book of Job, and almost unanswerable apart from a life that appreciates eternity and our accountability in the world beyond.

b. **Again, there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the work of the righteous:** Perhaps even more of a problem to the Preacher was the question, "Why do **wicked men** seem to be blessed?" The strength of this question also made life seem meaningless (**vanity**).

i. One might say that this question is even more troublesome, because in a very real sense, there are no **just men**, and all can be seen as **wicked** in some way. Why goodness is shown to the undeserving is a question that looks to the remarkable mercy of God.

*3. (15-17) Live for the moment – and know there is more than what you can see.*

**So I commended enjoyment, because a man has nothing better under the sun than to eat, drink, and be merry; for this will remain with him in his labor *all* the days of his life which God gives him under the sun.**

**When I applied my heart to know wisdom and to see the business that is done on earth, even though one sees no sleep day or night, then I saw all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done**

**under the sun. For though a man labors to discover *it*, yet he will not find *it*; moreover, though a wise *man* attempts to know *it*, he will not be able to find *it* .**

a. **So I commended enjoyment:** With the meaninglessness of life so plain to the Preacher, all he could counsel was to make the best of a bad situation and enjoy life the best way possible.

b. **Then I saw all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun:** Here Solomon begins to undermine his once-so-certain premise of life lived without an eternal perspective. He recognizes that man **cannot find out the work** of God in fullness; so what we see does not define what there actually is.

i. **The business that is done on earth, even though one sees no sleep day or night:** "The very busyness of life worries us into asking where it is taking us, and what it means, if it does mean anything. We hardly need Qoheleth to point out that this is the very question that defeats us." (Kidner)

ii. **He will not be able to find it:** "His conclusion is that we must be content not to know everything. Neither hard work (*toil*), persistent endeavour (*seeking*), skill or experience (*wisdom*) will unravel the mystery. Wise men may make excessive claims; they too will be baffled." (Eaton)

## **Death Comes to All**

**Ecc 9:1** I thought long and hard about all this and saw that God controls the actions of wise and righteous people, even their love and their hate. No one knows anything about what lies ahead.

Ecc 9:2 It makes no difference. The same fate comes to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the bad, to those

who are religious and those who are not, to those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. A good person is no better off than a sinner; one who takes an oath is no better off than one who does not.

Ecc 9:3 One fate comes to all alike, and this is as wrong as anything that happens in this world. As long as people live, their minds are full of evil and madness, and suddenly they die.

Ecc 9:4 But anyone who is alive in the world of the living has some hope; a live dog is better off than a dead lion.

Ecc 9:5 Yes, the living know they are going to die, but the dead know nothing. They have no further reward; they are completely forgotten.

Ecc 9:6 Their loves, their hates, their passions, all died with them. They will never again take part in anything that happens in this world.

### **Enjoy Life with the One You Love**

Ecc 9:7 Go ahead—eat your food and be happy; drink your wine and be cheerful. It's all right with God.

Ecc 9:8 Always look happy and cheerful.

Ecc 9:9 Enjoy life with the one you love, as long as you live the useless life that God has given you in this world. Enjoy every useless day of it, because that is all you will get for all your trouble.

Ecc 9:10 Work hard at whatever you do, because there will be no action, no thought, no knowledge, no wisdom in the world of the dead—and that is where you are going.

### **Wisdom Better than Folly**

Ecc 9:11 I realized another thing, that in this world fast runners do not always win the races, and the brave do not always win the battles. The wise do not always earn a living, intelligent people do not always get rich, and capable people

do not always rise to high positions. Bad luck happens to everyone.

Ecc 9:12 You never know when your time is coming. Like birds suddenly caught in a trap, like fish caught in a net, we are trapped at some evil moment when we least expect it.

Ecc 9:13 There is something else I saw, a good example of how wisdom is regarded in this world.

Ecc 9:14 There was a little town without many people in it. A powerful king attacked it. He surrounded it and prepared to break through the walls.

Ecc 9:15 Someone lived there who was poor, but so clever that he could have saved the town. But no one thought about him.

Ecc 9:16 I have always said that wisdom is better than strength, but no one thinks of the poor as wise or pays any attention to what they say.

Ecc 9:17 It is better to listen to the quiet words of someone wise than to the shouts of a ruler at a council of fools.

Ecc 9:18 Wisdom does more good than weapons, but one sinner can undo a lot of good.

## **Ecclesiastes 9:1-18**

### **Ecclesiastes 9 - The Best Way to Live Under the Sun**

#### **A. In light of death, live life and make the best of a bad thing.**

*1. (1-6) The despair of death: the same thing happens to everyone.*

**For I considered all this in my heart, so that I could declare it all: that the righteous and the wise and their works *are* in the hand of God. People know neither love nor hatred *by* anything *they* see before them. All things *come* alike to all:**

**One event *happens* to the righteous and the wicked;  
To the good, the clean, and the unclean;  
To him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice.  
As is the good, so *is* the sinner;  
He who takes an oath as *he* who fears an oath.**

**This *is* an evil in all that is done under the sun: that  
one thing *happens* to all. Truly the hearts of the sons  
of men are full of evil; madness *is* in their hearts  
while they live, and after that *they go* to the dead. But  
for him who is joined to all the living there is hope,  
for a living dog is better than a dead lion.**

**For the living know that they will die;  
But the dead know nothing,  
And they have no more reward,  
For the memory of them is forgotten.  
Also their love, their hatred, and their envy have now  
perished;  
Nevermore will they have a share  
In anything done under the sun.**

**a. The righteous and the wise and their works are  
in the hand of God... All things come alike to all:**  
With his *under the sun* premise – excluding any sense of  
eternity or accountability in a life to come – man can  
**know neither love nor hatred by anything they see  
before them.** Creation can tell us God is; it doesn't tell  
us very well that God loves us.

i. "We have only to use our eyes without prejudice,  
according to Psalms 19 and Rom 1:19 ff., to see that  
there is a powerful and glorious Creator. But it takes  
more than observation to discover how He is disposed  
towards us." (Kidner)

ii. Seeing beyond this *under the sun* perspective, we  
can say that we should not measure God's love by

what happens in life. We measure God's love by what Jesus did at the cross.

ii. The Preacher has once again allowed his thoughts of God's sovereign power (**in the hand of God**) to develop into fatalism (**all things come alike to all**). The thought process may go like this: "I know God rules over all things." Then, "It seems that the same thing happens to all; all die without real meaning revealed for their life." Finally, "The all-powerful God means it to be this way."

b. **One event happens to the righteous and the wicked... as is the good, so is the sinner:** This develops Solomon's idea that all share the same destiny in this meaningless life of ours. This is certainly how things *appeared* to Solomon with his *under the sun* premise.

c. **This is an evil in all that is done under the sun:** Speaking from his premise, the Preacher says that all have the same fate, but *he does not like it*. It's wrong that **one event happens to the righteous and the wicked**.

i. "To all appearances, God is just not interested. The things that are supposed to matter most to Him turn out to make no difference – or none that anyone can see – to the way we are disposed of in the end. Moral or immoral, religious or profane, we are all mown down alike." (Kidner)

d. **For him who is joined to all the living there is hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion:** This makes perfect sense from an *under the sun* perspective. If all existence and consciousness end with death, then the *only* thing that matters is this present life (and therefore nothing really matters).

e. **The dead know nothing... Nevermore will they have a share in anything done under the sun:** With great poetic effect, Solomon puts forth the belief that all existence and consciousness end with this life.

2. (7-10) *With such a view of life and death, joy is only found in the moment.*

**Go, eat your bread with joy,  
And drink your wine with a merry heart;  
For God has already accepted your works.  
Let your garments always be white,  
And let your head lack no oil.**

**Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity; for that *is* your portion in life, and in the labor which you perform under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do *it* with your might; for *there is* no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.**

a. **Go, eat your bread with joy:** From outside of his *under the sun* premise, we see a touch of humor in the Preacher's analysis. "Life is utterly meaningless, and our common death and destiny prove it to be so. So forget about all I have said and have a good time." It is small hope given to despairing men and women, but it is the best he can do.

b. **For God has already accepted your works:** Given the recent emphasis on the sovereign power of God (Ecc 7:13; Ecc 9:1), we sense both fatalism and wishing in this statement. Perhaps the sense is, "**God has already accepted your works** – *I hope*; because if He hasn't, there is nothing you can do about it."

c. **Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He has given you**

**under the sun, all your days of vanity:** Clearly, Solomon knew that enjoying the good things at hand in this life – **bread, wine, garments,** comforts (**let your head lack no oil**), and a **wife whom you love** – none of these took away the meaninglessness of life. “Make **your vain life** a little better,” he counseled.

i. “*White garments* and anointing *oil* make life more comfortable in a hot climate.” (Eaton)

ii. “The demands of marriage include the giving of affection (*whom you love*; cf. Eph 5:25), the active quest for enjoyment (*Enjoy life*, rsv), a life-long (*all... your...life*) encouragement amid the responsibilities and duties of life (*in all your toil at which you toil*).” (Eaton)

d. **Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going:** The Preacher continued to give advice meant to make the best of the bad situation of life **under the sun**.

i. In the 1960s there was a beer commercial where the announcer said something like this: “You only go around once in life, so you’ve got to grab for all the gusto you can.” The ad writers for Schlitz beer could have properly given credit to Solomon for the idea.

ii. We can apply the attitude reflected in Ecc 9:10 to our present service for God, and **do it with your might**. “No man ever served God by doing things tomorrow.” (Spurgeon)

iii. “Man was not created to be idle, he was not elected to be idle, he was not redeemed to be idle, he was not quickened to be idle, and he is not sanctified by God’s grace to be idle.” (Spurgeon)



3. (11-12) *Time and chance make life under the sun hard to understand.*

**I returned and saw under the sun that—  
The race *is* not to the swift,  
Nor the battle to the strong,  
Nor bread to the wise,  
Nor riches to men of understanding,  
Nor favor to men of skill;  
But time and chance happen to them all.  
For man also does not know his time:  
Like fish taken in a cruel net,  
Like birds caught in a snare,  
So the sons of men *are* snared in an evil time,  
When it falls suddenly upon them.**

a. **I returned and saw under the sun that – the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong:** Solomon wondered, “If this life is all there is, then why doesn’t this life make more sense?” In a world that made more sense **under the sun**, then the **swift** would always win the **race** and the **strong** would always win the **battle**. Yet it doesn’t always work that way.

b. **But time and chance happen to them all:** The Preacher again struggles against a sense of fatalism. In his somewhat contradictory way, the one who previously proclaimed God’s management of all (Ecc 7:13; Ecc 9:1) now wondered if it didn’t all happen according to **time and chance**.

i. “*Time and chance* are paired, no doubt because they both have a way of taking matters suddenly out of our hands.” (Kidner)

c. **The sons of men are snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them:** From his **under the sun** perspective, it seemed that man was more subject to the

whims of **time and chance** than of a loving, all-powerful God.

## **B. Unappreciated wisdom.**

### *1. (13-15) Wisdom unrecognized.*

**This wisdom I have also seen under the sun, and it seemed great to me: There was a little city with few men in it; and a great king came against it, besieged it, and built great snares around it. Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that same poor man.**

a. **A poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city:** Solomon tells a story about a **poor wise man** whose **wisdom** saved a city against the siege of a **great king**. This **seemed great** to Solomon; it was a wonderful and significant display of wisdom.

b. **Yet no one remembered that same poor man:** Under the premise that death ends existence and consciousness for all, Solomon protested that the only lasting meaning this man might have – to be **remembered** – was taken away. The almost unbelievable fleetingness of fame added to the sense of meaninglessness of life.

i. Men quickly forget, but God never does. He knows those who are His (2Ti 2:19). He has a book of remembrance before Him for those that fear the Lord (Mal 3:16), and their names are written in heaven (Luk 10:20).

### *2. (16-18) Wisdom thwarted.*

**Then I said:**

**“Wisdom *is* better than strength.**

**Nevertheless the poor man’s wisdom *is* despised,  
And his words are not heard.**

**Words of the wise, *spoken quietly, should be heard*  
Rather than the shout of a ruler of fools.  
Wisdom *is* better than weapons of war;  
But one sinner destroys much good."**

a. **Wisdom is better than strength:** The Preacher knew that even though wisdom is not appreciated, and it is ultimately vain, it was still **better than strength**.

b. **Words of the wise, spoken quietly, should be heard rather than the shout of a ruler of fools:** *Because* wisdom is superior, it should be heard above the shouts of the foolish – even though wisdom will often be unappreciated.

i. "The Preacher continues to emphasize the ease with which wisdom is counteracted." (Eaton)

c. **Wisdom is better than weapons of war; but one sinner destroys much good:** Wisdom is **better** – better than strength (**weapons of war**), better than foolishness – but all the good that wisdom does can quickly be taken away by **one sinner** who **destroys much good**.

i. Solomon sensed that it was much easier to destroy than to build. Establishing things by wisdom is much more difficult than destroying them by the work of even **one sinner**.

ii. "Adam's sin infected the whole race of man; Achan's transgression caused Israel's defeat (Jos 7:11-12); Rehoboam's folly occasioned the great schism (1Ki 12:16)." (Deane)

**Ecc 10:1** Dead flies can make a whole bottle of perfume stink, and a little stupidity can cancel out the greatest wisdom.

Ecc 10:2 It is natural for the wise to do the right thing and for fools to do the wrong thing.

Ecc 10:3 Their stupidity will be evident even to strangers they meet along the way; they let everyone know that they are fools.

Ecc 10:4 If your ruler becomes angry with you, do not hand in your resignation; serious wrongs may be pardoned if you keep calm.

Ecc 10:5 Here is an injustice I have seen in the world—an injustice caused by rulers.

Ecc 10:6 Stupid people are given positions of authority while the rich are ignored.

Ecc 10:7 I have seen slaves on horseback while noblemen go on foot like slaves.

Ecc 10:8 If you dig a pit, you fall in it; if you break through a wall, a snake bites you.

Ecc 10:9 If you work in a stone quarry, you get hurt by stones. If you split wood, you get hurt doing it.

Ecc 10:10 If your ax is dull and you don't sharpen it, you have to work harder to use it. It is smarter to plan ahead.

Ecc 10:11 Knowing how to charm a snake is of no use if you let the snake bite first.

Ecc 10:12 What the wise say brings them honor, but fools are destroyed by their own words.

Ecc 10:13 They start out with silly talk and end up with pure madness.

Ecc 10:14 A fool talks on and on. No one knows what is going to happen next, and no one can tell us what will happen after we die.

Ecc 10:15 Only someone too stupid to find his way home would wear himself out with work.

Ecc 10:16 A country is in trouble when its king is a youth and its leaders feast all night long.

Ecc 10:17 But a country is fortunate to have a king who makes his own decisions and leaders who eat at the proper

time, who control themselves and don't get drunk.

Ecc 10:18 When you are too lazy to repair your roof, it will leak, and the house will fall in.

Ecc 10:19 Feasting makes you happy and wine cheers you up, but you can't have either without money.

Ecc 10:20 Don't criticize the king, even silently, and don't criticize the rich, even in the privacy of your bedroom. A bird might carry the message and tell them what you said.

## **Ecclesiastes 10:1-20**

### **Ecclesiastes 10 - Folly and Wisdom**

#### **A. The disgrace of foolishness.**

*1. (1) Foolishness disgraces a wise man's honor.*

**Dead flies putrefy the perfumer's ointment,  
And cause it to give off a foul odor;  
So does a little folly to one respected for wisdom and  
honor.**

a. **Dead flies putrefy the perfumer's ointment:** Solomon here followed a familiar form in stating proverbs. An obvious statement is made: that **dead flies** spoil a fine **ointment** and cause it to smell.

i. "This is a metaphorical confirmation of the truth enunciated at the end of the last chapter, 'One sinner destroyeth much good.'" (Deane)

b. **So does a little folly to one respected for wisdom and honor:** Even as small dead flies – quite little in proportion to the whole – spoil a fine **ointment**, so just a **little folly** spoils the reputation of someone regarded as wise and honorable.

i. "There are endless instances of prizes forfeited and good beginning marred in a single reckless moment –

not only by the irresponsible, such as Esau, but by the sorely tried, such as Moses and Aaron.” (Kidner)

ii. The Preacher is beginning to direct his arguments in the intended direction. To use the metaphor of a ship, he has sailed in many different directions to show us the meaninglessness of life. Now, still out of sight of land, he begins to tack his direction towards meaning and truth. Ecc 10:1 reminds us that *even small things have consequences*.

## 2. (2-3) Foolishness can't be hidden.

**A wise man's heart is at his right hand,  
But a fool's heart at his left.  
Even when a fool walks along the way,  
He lacks wisdom,  
And he shows everyone *that he is a fool*.**

a. **A wise man's heart is at his right hand, but a fool's heart at his left:** Since the **right hand** was regarded as the side of strength, skill, and favor, the **wise man's heart** is known and a strength to him. This is not true of the **fool**, whose **heart is at his left**.

i. “‘Right’ and ‘left’ are natural symbols for the strong and good, on the one hand, and for the weak and bad, on the other hand... The Latin word *sinister* means ‘left.’” (Wright)

ii. “To have one's *heart at his left side* is to have the ‘springs of life’ (Pro 4:23) located in the realm of practical and spiritual incompetence.” (Eaton)

b. **He shows everyone that he is a fool:** The foolish man (or woman) has a way of making their folly evident. As Jesus would later say, *wisdom is justified by all her children* (Luk 7:25). Wisdom and folly become obvious in life.

## 3. (4-7) Foolishness in high places.

**If the spirit of the ruler rises against you,  
Do not leave your post;  
For conciliation pacifies great offenses.  
There is an evil I have seen under the sun,  
As an error proceeding from the ruler:  
Folly is set in great dignity,  
While the rich sit in a lowly place.  
I have seen servants on horses,  
While princes walk on the ground like servants.**

a. **If the spirit of the ruler rises against you:** The idea seems to be, "Even in a difficult situation, don't **leave your post**. Be faithful to your position and you will find that **conciliation pacifies great offenses**."

b. **Folly is set in dignity ... I have seen servants on horses:** The Preacher wanted to remind us that *not all is fair in this life*. Foolish men are promoted or accepted to positions of great leadership. Some lowly men are unwisely exalted (**servants on horses**) while some noblemen are humbled (**princes walk on the ground like servants**).

## **B. Evidence of folly and wisdom.**

### *1. (8-10) Foolishness in action.*

**He who digs a pit will fall into it,  
And whoever breaks through a wall will be bitten by a serpent.  
He who quarries stones may be hurt by them,  
And he who splits wood may be endangered by it.  
If the ax is dull,  
And one does not sharpen the edge,  
Then he must use more strength;  
But wisdom brings success.**

a. **He who digs a pit will fall into it:** Solomon listed several examples of those who did wrong or foolish

things and then suffered because of it.

i. "While spoiling his neighbour's property, he himself may come to greater mischief." (Clarke)

ii. Alexander Maclaren made a spiritual application of the idea, **whoever breaks through a wall will be bitten by a serpent**: "Whoso pulls down the wall of temperance, a serpent will bite him. Trembling hands, broken constitutions, ruined reputations, vanished ambitions, wasted lives, poverty, shame, and enfeebled will, death – these are the serpents that bite, in many cases, the transgressor."

**b. If the ax is dull, and one does not sharpen the edge, then he must use more strength; but wisdom brings success**: The fool will continue to use a **dull** ax, instead of being wise and sharpening the edge. The fool doesn't wisely consider the future, and how wise use of one's time in the present can make for a much better future.

i. F.B. Meyer made a helpful application to the Christian worker of this by analogy: "There are times with all who work for God, when they are blunt, through much usage .... At all such times let us turn to God and say, 'Put in more strength. Let thy power be magnified in my weakness. Give more grace, so that thy work shall not suffer' .... Surely more work is done by a blunt edge and divine power, than by a sharp edge and little power."

*2. (11-14) The babbling talk of the foolish.*

**A serpent may bite when *it is* not charmed;  
The babbler is no different.**

**The words of a wise man's mouth *are* gracious,  
But the lips of a fool shall swallow him up;  
The words of his mouth begin with foolishness,**



**And the end of his talk *is* raving madness.**

**A fool also multiplies words.**

**No man knows what is to be;**

**Who can tell him what will be after him?**

a. **A serpent may bite when it is not charmed; the babbler is no different:** As dangerous as a biting serpent is the one who talks – babbles – like a fool. Though the **words of a wise man's mouth are gracious**, the **lips of a fool shall swallow him up**.

b. **A fool also multiplies words... who can tell him what will be after him:** The fool is known by his many words, and by his presumption about the future – when **no man knows what is to be**.

i. "The word for 'fool' here is *saka*, which implies a dense, confused thinker." (Deane)

ii. Previously the Preacher had confidently stated that there is nothing beyond this life, and that this life should be lived with an *under the sun* premise. He now casts more doubt upon that premise.

3. (15) *The fool at work.*

**The labor of fools wearies them,**

**For they do not even know how to go to the city!**

a. **The labor of fools wearies them:** The fool has no desire to work; or when they do they quickly become wearied. They can't see that it is *wise to work now in order to prepare for the future*.

b. **They do not even know how to go to the city:** The Preacher continued to subtly back away from his previous *under the sun* premise. The fool has no sense of direction or goal. They live their life as if it were meaningless, directionless.

i. "The phrase, 'how to go to the city,' seems to be a kind of proverbial comparison for anything that is very plain and conspicuous." (Maclaren)

ii. "In a fine note of sarcasm, this proverb says that a person may be so involved in arguing about the universe that he misses what the ordinary person is concerned about, namely, finding the way home." (Wright)

iii. "To be ever learning, never arriving, as 2Ti 3:7 portrays some people, is to be a trifler who contrives to get lost on even the straightest *way to the city*. That is folly without even the excuse of ignorance." (Kidner)

4. (16-20) *How foolishness corrupts a nation.*

**Woe to you, O land, when your king *is* a child,  
And your princes feast in the morning!  
Blessed *are* you, O land, when your king *is* the son of  
nobles,  
And your princes feast at the proper time—  
For strength and not for drunkenness!  
Because of laziness the building decays,  
And through idleness of hands the house leaks.  
A feast is made for laughter,  
And wine makes merry;  
But money answers everything.  
Do not curse the king, even in your thought;  
Do not curse the rich, even in your bedroom;  
For a bird of the air may carry your voice,  
And a bird in flight may tell the matter.**

a. **Woe to you, O land, when your king *is* a child:**  
Solomon himself felt that he was but a child when he came to the throne of Israel; therefore, he wisely asked God for the wisdom to lead a great people (1Ki 3:7-9).

i. "A nation's first need is a mature leader. RSV *is a child* refers to age but to general maturity." (Eaton)

b. **Woe to you, O land ... Blessed are you, O land:**

The Preacher understood that a land was **blessed** by good, faithful leaders, but cursed under wicked and incompetent leaders.

i. **Because of laziness the building decays:** "Lazy rulers bring down the great house of the nation, as a lazy householder lets the beams of his house collapse so that the roof sags and lets in the rain." (Wright)

ii. If Ecc 10:18 pictures the fall of a nation, the following lines give the *reason* for fall – leaders who are foolish, selfish, and concerned only for their own pleasure and good.

iii. "They do nothing in order; turn night into day, and day into night; sleep when they should wake, and wake when they should sleep; attending more to chamberings and banquetings, than to the concerns of the state." (Clarke)

c. **A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes merry; but money answers everything:** Solomon here spoke in the voice of a wicked, unwise king. Along this line, he counseled his readers to not **curse the king** lest they be found out.

i. "Kings have long ears, heavy hands; walls also and hedges have ears." (Trapp)

ii. " 'A little bird told me' is a proverb which appears in a variety of forms and cultures, including Aristophanes' *The Birds* and the Hittite *Take of Elkuhirsu*." (Eaton)

iii. The thought is suggestive. A king may hear of my wrongdoing and I may suffer because of it, even

though I did not know he could learn of it. *The same is true of my wrongdoing before God.*

### **Cast Your Bread upon the Waters**

**Ecc 11:1** Invest your money in foreign trade, and one of these days you will make a profit.

Ecc 11:2 Put your investments in several places—many places even—because you never know what kind of bad luck you are going to have in this world.

Ecc 11:3 No matter which direction a tree falls, it will lie where it fell. When the clouds are full, it rains.

Ecc 11:4 If you wait until the wind and the weather are just right, you will never plant anything and never harvest anything.

Ecc 11:5 God made everything, and you can no more understand what he does than you understand how new life begins in the womb of a pregnant woman.

Ecc 11:6 Do your planting in the morning and in the evening, too. You never know whether it will all grow well or whether one planting will do better than the other.

Ecc 11:7 It is good to be able to enjoy the pleasant light of day.

Ecc 11:8 Be grateful for every year you live. No matter how long you live, remember that you will be dead much longer. There is nothing at all to look forward to.

Ecc 11:9 Young people, enjoy your youth. Be happy while you are still young. Do what you want to do, and follow your heart's desire. But remember that God is going to judge you for whatever you do.

Ecc 11:10 Don't let anything worry you or cause you pain. You aren't going to be young very long.

## **Ecclesiastes 11:1-10**

### **Ecclesiastes 11 - Towards True Wisdom**

## **A. Looking beyond what can be seen.**

*1. (1-2) Working for a profit that can't be immediately seen.*

**Cast your bread upon the waters,  
For you will find it after many days.  
Give a serving to seven, and also to eight,  
For you do not know what evil will be on the earth.**

a. **Cast your bread upon the waters:** This probably refers to a shipping venture that required great patience for the return of the investment. The idea is that it was wise and good to work for a return that could not be immediately seen.

i. "The allusion is to the element of trust in much ancient business. Ships on commercial voyages might be long delayed before any profit resulted." (Eaton)

ii. Some commentators (Trapp, Clarke, and others) think this speaks of generosity. **Cast your bread upon the waters** is to them a way of saying, "Give your material things to the needy in a way that might seem wasteful – as wasteful as throwing **bread upon the waters**, and you will be rewarded." If this is the sense, the point is much the same: do something now for a reward that cannot be immediately seen.

b. **Give a serving to seven, and also to eight, for you do not know what evil will be on the earth:** The Preacher counseled generosity and did so in light that the future – though uncertain – must be prepared for. With these ideas he continues to direct us towards the place of true wisdom.

i. "'Give a portion to seven' is advice to use all opportunity speculatively, because one does not know what calamities may be ahead, and because it is well to have provided beforehand for such contingencies." (Morgan)

2. (3-4) *Cause, effect, and the limits of analysis.*

**If the clouds are full of rain,  
They empty *themselves* upon the earth;  
And if a tree falls to the south or the north,  
In the place where the tree falls, there it shall lie.  
He who observes the wind will not sow,  
And he who regards the clouds will not reap.**

a. **If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth:** With these proverbs Solomon emphasized the idea of cause and effect. This principle alone directs us toward eternity, because the wickedness or goodness of man in this earthly life is often not answered in this life. The necessary effect from that cause must be realized in eternity.

i. Clouds are designed to be **full of rain**, and therefore to **empty themselves upon the earth**. For Spurgeon, this idea of design and what comes from it suggested the work of Jesus for us: "Now, dear heart, if thou believest Christ to be a cloud that is full of rain, for what reason is he full? Why, that he may empty himself upon the earth. There was no need that he should be a man full of sympathy except to sympathize with mourning men and women. There was no need that he should bleed except that he might bleed for you. There was no necessity that he should die except that the power of his death might deliver you from death."

ii. **In the place where the tree falls, there it shall lie:** "Jerome's strange interpretation of the fallen tree has persisted, and some Christians have quoted it out of context. The tree, he said, is the dead person, and his destiny is fixed at death. But while this is true enough, it cannot be proved from this verse." (Wright)

b. **He who observes the wind will not sow:** The farmer who is overly analytical about **the wind** or **the clouds** will never plant his fields, and thus he **will not reap**. The Preacher gently pushes us away from an overly analytical approach to life.

i. "If we are always waiting for favouring conditions, we shall resemble the farmer who is ever looking out for perfect weather, and lets the whole autumn pass without one handful of grain reaching the furrows." (Meyer)

ii. "If we keep on observing circumstances, instead of trusting God, we shall be guilty of *disobedience*. God bids me sow: I do not sow, because the wind would blow some of my seed away. God bids me reap: I do not reap, because there is a black cloud there, and before I can house the harvest, some of it may be spoiled. I may say what I like; but I am guilty of disobedience." (Spurgeon)

iii. Spurgeon went on in that sermon (*Sowing in the Wind, Reaping Under Clouds*) to describe other ways that this attitude sins against God and man. To observe circumstances instead of trusting God shows *unbelief, rebellion, foolish fear, and idleness*.

## **B. Moving towards real wisdom, through fits and starts.**

### *1. (5) The limitations of knowledge.*

**As you do not know what *is* the way of the wind,  
Or how the bones *grow* in the womb of her who is  
with child,  
So you do not know the works of God who makes  
everything.**

a. **As you do not know what is the way of the wind:**  
Solomon again reminds us of the limitations of human

knowledge. We don't know **the way of the wind** or how **the bones grow in the womb** of a mother.

i. "Thus at this point in his closing appeal the Preacher simply insists on a fact: certain aspects of God's working on earth defy explanation. The mystery which shrouds our very origin underlies the whole of reality." (Eaton)

ii. As Jesus would later say, *The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit (Joh 3:8).*

b. **So you do not know the works of God who makes everything:** In the same way we don't know the hidden things, we also do not know **the works of God** in any comprehensive way. The Preacher brings us to a place of humility and submission to God and His works that again pushes us out of the previously entrenched *under the sun* premise.

2. (6) *Sowing seed with more trust than certainty.*

**In the morning sow your seed,  
And in the evening do not withhold your hand;  
For you do not know which will prosper,  
Either this or that,  
Or whether both alike *will be* good.**

a. **In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand:** Using agricultural images, the Preacher tells us to do work of all kinds – the work one would do **in the morning**, and the work one would do **in the evening**.

i. "Some commentators have taken *Sow your seed* to refer to the begetting of children following the Talmud and Midrash, but this is hardly suitable to the context." (Eaton)



b. **For you do not know which will prosper:** Solomon again pushes towards an appropriately humble loss of self-confidence. *We should* give ourselves to all kinds of work because we **do not know** the results. We know less of the future than we think we do; this shakes the previously assured *under the sun* premise.

3. (7-8) *A final flirtation with the under the sun premise.*

**Truly the light is sweet,  
And it is pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun;  
But if a man lives many years  
And rejoices in them all,  
Yet let him remember the days of darkness,  
For they will be many.  
All that is coming is vanity.**

a. **Truly the light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun:** After repeatedly arguing from the premise expressed by the phrase *under the sun*, the Preacher once more expressed the idea before coming to his conclusions in the last chapter of Ecclesiastes.

b. **Yet let him remember the days of darkness:** The sun gives light, but the *under the sun* premise seemed to bring the Preacher (and us) into **days of darkness**; and if lived under that premise, those dark days **will be many** and there will be much **vanity** to come.

### **Remember Your Creator in Your Youth**

**Ecc 12:1** So remember your Creator while you are still young, before those dismal days and years come when you will say, "I don't enjoy life."

Ecc 12:2 That is when the light of the sun, the moon, and the stars will grow dim for you, and the rain clouds will never pass away.

Ecc 12:3 Then your arms, that have protected you, will tremble, and your legs, now strong, will grow weak. Your

teeth will be too few to chew your food, and your eyes too dim to see clearly.

Ecc 12:4 Your ears will be deaf to the noise of the street. You will barely be able to hear the mill as it grinds or music as it plays, but even the song of a bird will wake you from sleep.

Ecc 12:5 You will be afraid of high places, and walking will be dangerous. Your hair will turn white; you will hardly be able to drag yourself along, and all desire will be gone. We are going to our final resting place, and then there will be mourning in the streets.

Ecc 12:6 The silver chain will snap, and the golden lamp will fall and break; the rope at the well will break, and the water jar will be shattered.

Ecc 12:7 Our bodies will return to the dust of the earth, and the breath of life will go back to God, who gave it to us.

Ecc 12:8 Useless, useless, said the Philosopher. It is all useless.

### **Fear God and Keep His Commandments**

Ecc 12:9 But because the Philosopher was wise, he kept on teaching the people what he knew. He studied proverbs and honestly tested their truth.

Ecc 12:10 The Philosopher tried to find comforting words, but the words he wrote were honest.

Ecc 12:11 The sayings of the wise are like the sharp sticks that shepherds use to guide sheep, and collected proverbs are as lasting as firmly driven nails. They have been given by God, the one Shepherd of us all.

Ecc 12:12 My child, there is something else to watch out for. There is no end to the writing of books, and too much study will wear you out.

Ecc 12:13 After all this, there is only one thing to say: Have reverence for God, and obey his commands, because

this is all that we were created for.

Ecc 12:14 God is going to judge everything we do, whether good or bad, even things done in secret.

## **Ecclesiastes 12:1-14**

### **Ecclesiastes 12 - The Conclusion of The Matter**

#### **A. Life in light of eternity.**

*1. (11:9-11:10) Even in youth, remember that judgment will one day come.*

**Rejoice, O young man, in your youth,  
And let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth;  
Walk in the ways of your heart,  
And in the sight of your eyes;  
But know that for all these  
God will bring you into judgment.  
Therefore remove sorrow from your heart,  
And put away evil from your flesh,  
For childhood and youth *are* vanity.**

a. **Rejoice, O young man, in your youth:** Perhaps this argued that Solomon now looked back from old age to the days of his youth, before an *under the sun* premise took a toll upon his life and mind. He hoped for better for his young readers.

i. Morgan, on the last portion of the book, beginning at 11:9: "Its first word, like the first word in the Manifesto of the King in later days, indicates the true thought and desire of God for man: 'Rejoice.'"

ii. This also indicates that in his conclusion, Solomon saw clearly that there was a place in **youth** (though not only there) in the legitimate pleasures and satisfactions of life. If the meaning of life was not found in the pursuit of pleasure (as in Ecc 2:10-11),

it is also not found in asceticism and self-denial for its own sake.

iii. If we accept the truth of the next few lines; that there is more to life than what we can see – that there is an eternity and an eternal God to reckon with – then the legitimate pleasures of life *can* be enjoyed in the best sense. One doesn't try to find meaning in those pleasures, but simply some good seasoning for a life that finds its meaning in eternity and the eternal God.

iv. "In this frame of mind we can now turn to the delights of life ... not as if they were opiates to tranquillize us, but as invigorating gifts of God." (Kidner)

v. "Rab, a Jewish teacher of the third century A.D., commented, 'Man will have to give account for all that he saw and did not enjoy.'" (Wright)

**b. Walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; but know that for all these God will bring you into judgment:** Here the Preacher comes to the answer of his premise and his book. One may live according to their **heart** and by what they see; but they should not think that their own **heart** or **eyes** will be their judge. *There is a God in heaven who will bring all your life and works into judgment.*

i. "The statement is brief, for he knew nothing more than the fact, and could add nothing to it." (Deane)

ii. Here is the antidote and antithesis of the *under the sun* premise. Life is lived not only for this life but also for eternity, knowing that good will be rewarded and evil will be condemned perfectly by the **God** who **will bring you into judgment**. Literally, Solomon spoke

of **the judgment**, referring to our great accountability before God.

iii. "His judicial activity is not 'the type of the blindfold maiden holding a balance in her hand' nor 'the cold neutrality of an impartial judge', but is rather the consuming energy in which God must bring about 'right'." (Eaton) *This makes everything full of meaning.*

c. **Therefore remove sorrow from your heart:** Living in light of eternity and the eternal God gives us hope for this life, not only for the life to come. It will **remove sorrow from the heart**.

i. The Apostle Paul knew this eternal perspective banished **sorrow from the heart** and later wrote, *Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.* (1Co 15:58)

ii. Without this premise of eternity and the eternal God, life is vain and meaningless. The Apostle Paul understood this: *If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable* (1Co 15:19).

d. **And put away evil from your flesh:** Living in light of eternity and the eternal God also is an incentive to live a holy, godly life in our days on earth. We know that our good will be rewarded and blessed; not only in this life, but also in the life to come.

e. **For childhood and youth are vanity:** In an *under the sun* premise, **childhood and youth** are all that matter. This isn't true when we live in light of eternity and the eternal God.

2. (12:1) *The value of remembering God and eternity in youth.*

**Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth,  
Before the difficult days come,  
And the years draw near when you say,  
“I have no pleasure in them”:**

a. **Remember now your Creator:** The idea of the **Creator** is important. This is the first mention of God as **Creator**. To this point the Preacher worked hard to ignore the eternal God one must stand before in the future; yet he also refused to think about the **Creator** God who existed *before* he did. This self-imposed ignorance relieved the sense of accountability before the **Creator**, which still must be accounted for in the life to come.

i. “*Creator* is a plural form in Hebrew, suggesting greatness of majesty.” (Eaton)

b. **Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth:** Solomon knew that **youth** are often those most likely to discount the reality of eternity and the eternal God. This is natural, but regrettable, in youth – they are often the most difficult to convince that this life is merely a brief prelude to eternity.

i. Adam Clarke suggested several practical and important points to draw from this exhortation, among them:

- You are not your own; you have no right to yourself. God made you; He is **your Creator**.
- **Remember** Him; *consider* that He is your Creator.
- Remember Him in your **youth**; do not fail to give God the first and the best.

ii. "The Preacher here exhorts them to remember God betimes, to gather manna in the morning of their lives, to present the first-fruits to God." (Trapp)

iii. "As in youth all the powers are more active and vigorous, so they are capable of superior enjoyments. *Faith, hope, and love, will be in their best tenor, their greatest vigour, and in their least encumbered state. And it will be easier for you to believe, hope, pray, love, obey, and bear your cross, than it can be in old age and decrepitude.*" (Clarke)

c. **Before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say, "I have no pleasure in them":** The Preacher advised young people to remember God and eternity **before** they suffered greatly by subjecting themselves to an *under the sun* premise and all the meaninglessness associated with it.

3. (2-5) *A poetic description of advancing age.*

**While the sun and the light,  
The moon and the stars,  
Are not darkened,  
And the clouds do not return after the rain;  
In the day when the keepers of the house tremble,  
And the strong men bow down;  
When the grinders cease because they are few,  
And those that look through the windows grow dim;  
When the doors are shut in the streets,  
And the sound of grinding is low;  
When one rises up at the sound of a bird,  
And all the daughters of music are brought low.  
Also they are afraid of height,  
And of terrors in the way;  
When the almond tree blossoms,  
The grasshopper is a burden,  
And desire fails.**

**For man goes to his eternal home,  
And the mourners go about the streets.**

a. **While the sun and the light, the moon and the stars, are not darkened:** Most agree that what follows here is a poetic description of the effects of advancing age.

- The arms and hands that keep the body now begin to tremble (**the keepers of the house tremble**).
- The legs and knees begin to sag (**the strong men bow down**).
- Teeth are lost and chewing is more difficult (**the grinders cease because they are few**).
- The eyes are dimmed (**the windows grow dim**).
- The ears become weaker and weaker (**the sound of grinding is low**).
- Sleep becomes more difficult and one is easily awakened (**one rises up at the sound of a bird**).
- Singing and music are less appreciated (**the daughters of music are brought low**).
- One becomes more fearful in life (**afraid of height, and of terrors in the way**).
- The hair becomes white (**the almond tree blossoms**).
- The once active become weak (**the grasshopper is a burden**).
- The passions and desires of life weaken and wane (**desire fails**).

i. **Desire fails:** "The word rendered 'desire' is found nowhere else in the Old Testament and its meaning is disputed." (Deane) Although, Kidner states: "This is the point of the Hebrew expression, 'the caper-berry



fails'. This berry was highly regarded as a stimulus to appetite and as an aphrodisiac."

b. **For man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets:** At the end of man's advancing age is **his eternal home** – *not* the unknown grave and darkness. The Preacher has now set man's advancing age in connection with eternity, not vanity.

i. We do well to remember that the Old Testament generally does not state the life and condition of man after this life with great certainty. Yet through his diligent searching, the Preacher has come to the right conclusion – that after this life, **man goes to his eternal home as the mourners go about the streets.**

ii. "So this wonderful book closes with the enunciation of a truth found nowhere else so clearly defined in the Old Testament, and thus opens the way to the clearer light shed upon the awful future by the revelation of the gospel." (Deane)

4. (6-7) *A final plea: Remember God before you go to life beyond the sun.*

**Remember your Creator before the silver cord is loosed,**

**Or the golden bowl is broken,**

**Or the pitcher shattered at the fountain,**

**Or the wheel broken at the well.**

**Then the dust will return to the earth as it was,**

**And the spirit will return to God who gave it.**

a. **Remember your Creator before the silver cord is loosed:** Solomon again pleads with his reader to remember God *before* this life is over, and he repeated a variety of metaphors to describe the ending of this life.

i. "The image points to the value of life (*silver... gold*), and the drama in the end of a life whose pieces cannot be put together again." (Eaton)

b. **Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it:** This is *why* it is so important to **remember your Creator** in this life; because when this life is over, one will answer to the eternal God and to eternity.

## **B. Conclusion: Eternity and the eternal God make everything matter.**

1. (8) *A final analysis of life under the sun.*

**"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher,  
"All is vanity."**

a. **Vanity of vanities:** By way of contrast, the Preacher returned to his starting point (Ecc 1:2). Having examined the meaninglessness of life with an *under the sun* premise (excluding eternity and the eternal God), one *must* say that life is not only meaningless, but the ultimate in meaninglessness (**vanity of vanities**).

b. **All is vanity:** With the *under the sun* premise, not only is life meaningless, but **all is vanity**. *Nothing* has meaning.

i. One man who reflected deeply on the meaning of life – and the price of a life lived without meaning – was a holocaust survivor named Viktor Frankl. His book *Man's Search for Meaning* relates some of his war experiences and understanding of life. He wrote:

ii. "This striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man." "I think the meaning of our existence is not invented by ourselves, but rather detected." (Frankl)

iii. "I turn to the detrimental influence of that feeling of which so many patients complain today, namely, the feeling of the total and ultimately meaninglessness of their lives. They lack the awareness of a meaning worth living for. They are haunted by the experience of their inner emptiness, a void within themselves.... This existential vacuum manifests itself mainly in a state of boredom." (Frankl)

iv. Frankl warned of the danger of those who live without meaning: "No instinct tells him what he has to do, and no tradition tells him what he ought to do; sometimes he does not even know what he wishes to do. Instead, he either wishes to do what other people do (conformism) or he does what other people wish him to do (totalitarianism)."

v. Frankl was not a Christian and didn't believe there was any one meaning to life. He thought that each man had his own and it could even change from moment to moment. He thought that the meaning of life could be found in three ways. First, by doing a deed. Second, by experiencing a value. Third, by suffering.

2. (9-12) *The Preacher prods us towards true wisdom.*

**And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes, he pondered and sought out *and* set in order many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and *what was* written *was* upright—words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd. And further, my son, be admonished by these. Of making many books *there is* no end, and much study *is* wearisome to the flesh.**

a. **Because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people:** The Preacher's search for knowledge didn't leave him less wise. He was still a teacher of **the people** and a writer of **proverbs**.

b. **The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well driven nails:** The Preacher kept his confidence in the power of words to teach, challenge, and change people. Special confidence was appropriate in those words **given by one Shepherd**, even if they came through a **wise** man or a **scholar**.

i. The Preacher understood how one should proclaim God's truth.

- He should teach **the people knowledge**.
- He should seek **to find acceptable words**.
- He should seek to bring forth that which is **upright – words of truth**.
- He should make his words as **goads** and **well-driven nails**, with point and direction.
- He should bring forth the words **given by one Shepherd**.
- He should realize that good **study is wearisome to the flesh** and be willing to pay that price.

ii. **Goads ... well-driven nails:** "Here then are two more qualities that mark the pointed sayings of the wise: they spur the will and stick in the memory." (Kidner)

iii. "He realized that *pleasing words* (lit. 'words of delight') have a penetrating effect that slapdash and ill-considered words lack. Second, his words are written *uprightly*. The two characteristics balance

each other. His words are not so *pleasing* that they cease to be *upright*." (Eaton)

iv. "This eloquent man took pains that he might be heard with understanding, with obedience." (Trapp)

c. **Be admonished by these:** One should take special care to hear and **be admonished** by the words of God, **given by one Shepherd.**

d. **Of making many books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh:** The Preacher cautions us to not believe everything we read, for all does not come from the **one Shepherd.**

i. "We grow addicted to research itself, in love with our own hard questions. An answer would spoil everything." (Kidner)

ii. "Two thousand years have elapsed since this was written; and since that time some millions of treatises have been added, on all kinds of subjects, to those which have gone before. The press is still groaning under and teeming with books, books innumerable; and no one subject is yet *exhausted*, notwithstanding all that has been written on it." (Clarke)

*3. (13-14) Conclusion: live as one preparing for judgment and eternity*

**Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter:**

**Fear God and keep His commandments,**

**For this is man's all.**

**For God will bring every work into judgment,**

**Including every secret thing,**

**Whether good or evil.**

a. **Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter:**

After writing much of the Book of Ecclesiastes from a common but false premise, one that excluded eternal accountability and the God of eternity, now the Preacher

concludes, having led us to **the conclusion of the whole matter.**

**b. Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all:** Solomon came to understand that it *was* worth it to obey God, and this obedience both pleased God and fulfilled man's destiny.

i. "*Fear God* is a call that puts us in our place, and all other fears, hopes, and admirations in their place." (Kidner)

ii. "From that to this should be every man's pilgrimage in this world. We begin at vanity, and never know perfectly that we are vain till we come to fear God and keep his commandments." (Trapp)

iii. "If it is the 'beginning of wisdom' it is also *the end*, the conclusion; no progress in the believer's life leaves it behind." (Eaton)

iv. "This is the only place in Ecclesiastes where the *commands* of God are mentioned." (Eaton)

v. The King James Version (and other translations as well) inserted an unhelpful word in Ecc 12:13, translating *For this is the whole duty of man*. The word *duty* does not appear in the Hebrew text, and it has much more the idea of **for this is man's all**.

vi. "The last phrase reads literally: 'For this is the whole of the man.' Elsewhere in Ecclesiastes, however, the 'whole of the man' is a Hebrew idiom for 'every man' (*cf* 3:13; 5:19). The sense, therefore, is 'This applies to everyone'." (Eaton)

**c. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil:** This is impossible to say with an *under the sun* premise; yet it is the root reason why it is wise and good for man to **fear God and keep His commandments.**

i. There is, and will be, and eternal accounting for everything we do. This is the complete opposite of believing that all is vanity or meaningless; it means that *everything* has meaning and importance, both for the present and for eternity. "If God cares as much as this, nothing can be pointless." (Kidner)

ii. Through this book the Preacher carefully thought through (and lived through) a premise commonly held: of life lived without consideration of eternity and the eternal God. After all that, he comes to this conclusion – and challenges all those who continue holding to the premise he held through most all the book. "What would it be like, asks the Preacher, if things were utterly different from what you thought? What if this world is not the ultimate one? What if God exists and is a rewarder of those who seek him?" (Eaton)

iii. As Paul explained, this puts life into perspective: *For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven. (2Co 4:17 to 2Co 5:2)*

iv. "This is how the book will end. On this rock we can be destroyed; but it is rock, not quicksand. There is the chance to build." (Kidner)

v. In the 1930s an Australian alcoholic named Arthur Stace was converted and heard an inspiring sermon

on the subject of *eternity*. The preacher said, "I wish I could shout ETERNITY through all the streets of Sydney!" Stace was so moved that as he left the church he felt an immediate urge to write the word *Eternity*; he had a piece of chalk in his pocket and bent down and wrote on the pavement. Stace was hardly literate and could barely write his own name legibly; but when he wrote *Eternity*, he did so in elegant copperplate style script, usually about 2 feet wide on the pavement. He spent the rest of his life – until 1967 – waking each day at about 5:30, praying for an hour or so, then going around Sydney where he felt God led him to write *Eternity* all over the city. Solomon would have approved of both Arthur Stace and his message: *Eternity*.